

Recrudescence by listlessness

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Bi!Steve, Explicit Sexual Content, F/M, M/M, Multi, Threesome - F/M/M, Underage Sex, i also made a playlist for all music referenced here, i spent far too much time researching dates of music and films, medically accurate broken noses, oh hey there's equal opportunity oral sex here, so many headcanons, somebody please protect Steve Harrington

Language: English

Characters: Carol (Stranger Things), Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Steve Harrington's Parents, Tommy H. (Stranger Things)

Relationships: Carol/Tommy H. (Stranger Things), Carol/Tommy H./Steve Harrington, Steve Harrington/Original Male Character(s)

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Summary:

Tommy and Carol are an ebb and flow in Steve's flow, a matching pair that push and pull him in two directions. Steve finds himself going along, unable to help himself from falling into a pattern that is as familiar as his friends. Love has never been in short supply.

An exploration of Steve, Tommy and Carol's relationship from elementary school to college.

Recrudescence

Author's Note:

I got a little too excited writing this and just kept on going. I can't help it, my boy Steve deserves happiness. I also developed a shit load of headcanons (mostly about Carol) while writing this, and I had to add it all in. It's still come in about 8,000 words shorter than the original draft, and I might one day stick it in another fic.

The playlist of music explicitly mentioned, either in name or reference, can be found [here](#). It's by no means required listening, but go nuts.

It was Tuesday, November 2nd, in Steve's sophomore year of high school. He couldn't remember the exact time, but it was sometime between 3:34PM and 3:38PM. He knew that, because the opening jingle of I Love Lucy was playing from the Dervan's house, and it always tended to start a little late on a Tuesday due to the commercial that would play about eating the right amount of fruits and vegetables just before it. Steve was walking home from school, as he always did on a Tuesday due to basketball practice, and he was about to cut through the local playground as he always did, when it hit him with a strange queasiness that he had only ever experienced once before, when he walked in on his father standing a little close to his female colleague at the office.

He wasn't sure why it hit him then. It had always been there, lurking in the peripheries of his mind. He'd never even truly acknowledged it. Every guy had had those thoughts, surely, they were just unsaid. And it wasn't like Steve had ever really *looked* in the locker room. It was uncomfortable for everyone, with hair beginning to grow in places it had never been before, with bits starting to drop or get bigger, and acne beginning to move off the face and onto necks and shoulders and backs. So Steve didn't *look*, because he sure as hell didn't want anyone looking at him, but he *thought*, and that was perfectly natural.

Lacrosse practice was on at the same time as basketball, which was

all well and good because it meant they didn't have to share the court, unlike the girl's basketball team. It did mean, though, that they had to share the locker room afterwards. And Steve didn't mind that much, seeing as the lacrosse team was a group of funny guys, and given one of his best pals, Tommy, was on the team, Steve was pretty amenable to all the guys as a result. There was another guy on the lacrosse team, too, that Steve found extra funny: Sammy Grey. Sammy was a freshman, but he was already taller than Steve, even with his growth spurt. He had a wide, easy smile, skin the same colour and texture as milky coffee, and hair that made Steve think of the guy who sang that *I Wanna Be Your Lover* song. His eyes were also unusually pale, more ashy than pure blue, which stood out from his dark skin. Steve always got a little worked up when Sammy was around, hoping for his attention and buzzing with nervousness when he was addressed. He didn't think anything of it, though, seeing as Steve also got worked up when he was about to shoot the winning goal in basketball, or when he was about to kiss a pretty girl, and it was all one in the same in his head.

But that got him thinking: was Sammy more like basketball, or more like a pretty girl? And that thought didn't make a lick of sense, because Sammy was neither a basketball player, nor a pretty girl at a party. And Steve hadn't kissed anyone in a long while since he'd properly made out with anyone, seeing as he'd had braces and it hurt to kiss, so maybe he was just getting his wires crossed. But the more he thought about it, as he sat down at the base of the slide at the children's playground on the corner of Oak and Fifth, that maybe there was more to it than that. Steve liked basketball. Steve like girls. Steve also liked Sammy Grey.

And that thought was turned over in his head, as he began the slow walk back home, until he shuffled up the front door, digging his key out from his pocket and slid it into the lock. He meandered over to the kitchen, dug out the remaining box of cookies and began to eat them slowly as he considered this not-quite-brand-new information, dropping crumbs over the counter. He considered the implications of this development, with as much muster as a freshly-turned fifteen-year-old boy could, with a pile of English and history homework awaiting him, before accepting that some things couldn't be thought about in one afternoon, and pushed it all aside, in the same direction

as his father's affair, his mother's burgeoning alcohol habit, and the fact that for the past two years his parents had slept in different rooms on opposite sides of the house.

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Steve's first kiss was at twelve. He didn't count the kiss he had at five with a girl back in his hometown of Chicago, seeing as he didn't know what it meant. But at twelve, he decided he needed to get it over and done with. Carol had developed a pretty big crush on Tommy at that point, and she kept asking Steve for advice. Steve, who'd never even held hands with a girl, felt a little stuck, and decided it was his duty to give Carol the best advice he could.

So, shortly before the annual Christmas snowball, Steve decided he was going to go for his first kiss. He picked Selena Garcia, on account everyone agreed she was one of the prettiest girls in class. She collected porcelain rabbits, so Steve went out and bought one, along with a packet of Twizzlers. He shoved it all in his jacket pocket as he entered the dance and tried to not let his nerves get the best of him.

It took the better part of the evening for Steve to work up the nerve to talk to Selena. He'd never had a problem before. She was a quiet girl, but pleasant and sweet. Opening up the pack, he pulled one out and sucked on the end. Throughout the night, he kept looking over at her, waiting for when she stepped away from her friends and he could head over. *Killing Me Softly* by Roberta Flack was playing; he'd remember that forever. Making his way across the dance floor, he shoved the Twizzler back in his pocket and went over.

Somehow he got up the nerve to ask her to dance. She accepted, if a little confused, and he led her out. His hand was sticky, and he apologised. Looking back, Steve could see the signs that she hadn't been interested in kissing him. But right then, young and awkward and uneasy, Steve bullheadedly went in all the same. He'd have forgiven her if she'd slapped him, but quiet, sweet Selena let Steve try to mash his mouth on hers all the same. She even accepted the porcelain rabbit as payment for the kiss.

'You have Twizzler in your teeth,' she said when the song finished, and walked off to join her friends.

Worst of all, Carol eventually revealed she'd kissed Tommy the day before and he'd agreed to 'go steady'.

All in all, it was better than his first time having sex. Fourteen and over the summer, with a girl who was a year older and looked a little like Sandy from Grease. The heat meant he was sweating everywhere, and his skin stuck to the leather seat of the car. It was by sheer willpower that he hadn't lost it the moment he was in. He had no idea what to do with his hands, until the girl (whose name he couldn't even remember anymore, but he thought it might be Danielle) put them where she wanted and told him what to do. When he finally came, it was with a strange, empty feeling; he didn't even think Danielle got off.

At the very least, he could give Tommy tips later.

*

Steve managed to wait until two days after Christmas before the urge to tell someone grew too great. He still hadn't quite figured it all out himself. It wasn't the sort of thing he could just spring on someone. Robert, his father, wasn't exactly the most approachable guy, and he was rarely home early during the week. And then there was Molly, a melancholic woman who would sigh and shake her head and say she 'couldn't handle it today', before retreating to watch General Hospital. Besides, Steve had never really spoke to his parents about anything of great importance, and he wasn't going to start with the fact that he'd started to think of a more masculine form when he got off at night.

The snow storm that had hit on Christmas Eve had left him stranded with his parents for two days. The power had stayed on (and that was a Christmas miracle in of itself), so he'd been able to stay in the upstairs den and watch TV and do homework. Sure, he hadn't planned on doing homework on Christmas night and Boxing Day, but it was far more pleasant than talking to his folks. By the time the roads were cleared, he was suffering from more than a mild form of cabin fever. He called Tommy, found out his mom had a date with her new boyfriend that night, and invited himself over. No questions needed to be asked; Tommy had already said he had been worried, especially with the phone lines being down.

Steve picked Carol up on the way, shivering on his bike with his backpack and sleeping bag bundled up behind him. Her grandparents tended to believe the entire period between Christmas Eve and New Years Day were a sacred week, and it took some cajoling to convince them to let her go. Lying through his teeth, he promised that Tommy's mom would be home, and his little sister was there, too, nah his dad had visitation rights next weekend, and yeah, Annie had gotten so big, she was what, eight now? And Carol rolled her eyes behind her grandmother's back and stuck her tongue out and kissed her Meemaw and Pop goodbye when they turned around. Steve earned a firm punch to his bicep for his efforts, which he mockingly sulked over, much to her delight.

After spending the past few days stifled in his home with his parents, Tommy and Carol were like a breath of fresh air. He waved off the questions about his folks, turning the question back on his friends instead. Carol's mother was finishing off her bachelor's in speech therapy, but the snow storm had closed the airports and so she wasn't able to fly out until the following day. All of Hawkins liked to rag on Ms Alice Duckett for having her daughter at seventeen and out of wedlock, but Steve had always found her pretty kickass. She gave a damn about her daughter and wanted to do right by her, which was more than could be said for his own folks. Tommy's folks had split only a year earlier, and his mom was finding her feet again, while his dad had gone into the city to 'find himself', which apparently meant forgetting his family.

Steve envied them both in a messed up way. Dealing with one parent seemed a hell of a lot easier than two.

There was leftover Christmas roast, which Tommy took it upon himself to heat up for them. Carol had baked them personalised cookies for both of them, a tradition that spanned years; hearts for Tommy and stars for Steve. The sentiment was always muted a little by letters that spelt out 'LOSER' on the hearts and 'IDIOT' on the stars. Steve had smuggled out a pack of smokes and a bottle of red wine. Sure, none of them were particularly fond of red wine, but his parents wouldn't know it was gone. Well, if they did, it would be blamed on the other for drinking it. His mother had taken to drinking so much she likely wouldn't even realise it hadn't been her.

The night went by quickly. Tommy's mother called to remind him to ensure Steve and Carol called their folks, and that she'd be home later. The Harwoods had just gotten MTV, and the three ate their leftover Christmas dinner in front of the TV, sharing pulls from the bottle of wine. Carol imitated wine connoisseurs by declaring the pinot noir had a fruity undertone with a lashing of spice. Tommy grabbed her and kissed her, calling her pretty even if she was a loon. Steve gave a desperate, warbling rendition of '*Heroes*' when it came on, bounding on top of the couch and holding his fork above his head, his voice catching as the intensity in the song swelled and he shouted alongside Bowie.

'I can remeeember- standing by the wall. And the *guns*! Shot above our heads! And we *kissed* as though nothing could fall. And the *shame* was on the other side- '

He recalled that one interview Bowie had done, the one he'd read in an old issue of Playboy he'd dug out of his father's bedroom a few weeks earlier. It had been a desperate attempt to turn his attention back on women, solely women. There was a lengthy article, and Steve had read it, cross-legged on his bed, eyes scanning the page. He didn't fully understand the term, *bisexual*, but Bowie had spoken of men and women and his interest in them, and Steve wailed along to the song as Carol and Tommy pulled at his hands and dragged him off the couch in a fit of laughter.

The wine was soon finished, their lips stained black cherry red, and their pajamas were pulled on. Tommy turned the TV off, the hiss of static electricity crackling in the air. There was more space in the living room for the three of them than in Tommy's bedroom. It always felt a little like an adventure, the kind they used to have as kids. Steve had become friends with Carol first, when she would take horse riding lessons at his grandparent's ranch. They'd camp out in the stable during summer break, gap-toothed and sleeping in the loft. Tommy moved to Hawkins the fall of seventh grade, and Carol had developed a burning crush that had made Steve laugh and his arm subsequently turn black and blue from her embarrassed punches. He never felt like a third wheel, even on their dates. Even now, while he smoothed down his sleeping bag and the pair of them snickered under a blanket and grabbed at one another, he didn't mind all that

much.

Laying on the floor in his sleeping bag, Steve stretched out and let his eyes shut. The wine had made him mellow, his limbs feeling soft and warm. He could feel Tommy moving around him, his steps heavier than Carol's as he dropped a pillow and blanket down beside Steve.

'We need to find you a girl, bud.'

Steve laughed and grinned. He cracked open an eye to see Carol sitting on the edge of the couch, which she had taken for her own. It was hard to tell if his face was red due to the effects of the wine or because of the secret that was perched on the tip of his tongue, ready to be admitted. Tommy was on his side, head perched up in his hand, and he gave a sudden laugh.

'You got a crush!'

'No.'

'Spill.'

Tommy had always been able to tell. He'd declared Steve an awful liar years ago; it wasn't that, not really. More that Steve had never felt the need to lie around Tommy or Carol. They had bonded over fucked up families, and everything else that might need to be lied about had become secondary. He'd never even really felt the need to hide anything, until now.

'Who is it?' Carol gushed. 'Oh, I bet it's Tamara.'

'Ew, no,' Tommy immediately shot down.

'Laurie, then.'

'Nah, since she got her braces off, she doesn't do it for me any more,' Steve admitted. His words sounded funny in his head with the wine, like they were competing for room. 'I liked the challenge of not getting our braces locked.'

Tommy snapped his fingers. 'I know. I bet it's that punk girl, Meghan. The junior.'

There was a brief moment when Steve considered it. He didn't mind the look of her. She had a nose ring, and Steve wondered if when she got a cold, it would leak. That wouldn't be so attractive.

Tommy and Carol were cajoling him, and Steve groaned and threw his arms over his face. For a breath he just lay there, feeling an elbow in his ribs and a foot lightly kicking his thigh, and he didn't want to say anything, he didn't. But his mouth wanted to speak and he was terrible at turning it off at the best of times.

'I think I like guys.'

There was a long pause. Steve wondered if this was what authors meant by a pregnant pause, because he felt like he'd just given birth to some monstrosity. He wanted to turn the TV back on, because he heard from Dane Matthews that MTV played Michael Jackson between midnight and one AM, and maybe if they stayed up late they'd get to see it. But nobody was saying anything, and then there was another foot to his thigh, and Steve finally, *finally*, dared to lower his arm.

'You touched Becky's boobs,' Carol said. 'She told me.'

'And you got to third base with Amy Stanton,' Tommy added.

'You've slept with a girl,' Carol continued on, and Tommy nodded in agreement.

Steve rolled his eyes and shrugged. His arms disappeared under the sleeping bag and he hiked it up. The funny rollercoaster feeling of the wine was no longer entertaining and he just wanted to go to sleep. He could feel Carol and Tommy staring at him; maybe, if he wriggled far enough down into the sleeping bag, he could find a portal to an underground world and he could turn into a worm and pretend he'd never opened his big mouth.

'I *know*,' he said instead, because underground worm portals weren't real. 'And I like girls, I still do. But... I like Sammy Grey.'

'The lacrosse player?' Tommy asked, and then he added, 'he plays midfield,' which made sense because Carol didn't know who Sammy

was.

'Uh-huh.'

There was another pause, but it didn't feel as pregnant as the first one. Tommy made a noise, similar to the sound he made when he was asked a difficult question in chemistry, and always made Steve feel a little better because Tommy was better at chem than he was, so if Tommy was stumped, then it was okay if Steve was.

'I... yeah? He's... yeah. Tall. He's tall.'

'Tall is good,' Carol agreed.

'And... I hear black guys have really big dicks, so- hey!'

'That's racist.'

A pillow was thrown from the couch and Steve managed to look up just in time to see it hit Tommy right in the face. He was thrown back comically, and Steve let out a holler as Carol leapt from the couch and landed beside him. He had Tommy on his left, Carol on his right, and for a brief second it was just them laughing, Steve curling up as Tommy smacked him with the pillow for laughing at his misfortune. But the pillow was folded up and Tommy lay down on it, and the laughter quietened down. Carol had fixed him with a quizzical stare.

'So you're, what? Gay?'

And Steve said 'no', because he was pretty sure he wasn't.

'But you like guys,' Tommy stated.

And Steve said 'yes', because he was pretty sure he wasn't opposed to the idea of liking of guys more than just Sammy Grey.

'But you like girls,' Carol added.

And Steve didn't say anything, but he nodded, because he did.

'You can't like both guys and girls. You gotta choose.'

And Steve shrugged at that, because that's what had been bothering him. But as he lay there, with Tommy laying next to him, and Carol leaning up against the couch with her legs draped over the two of them, he wondered if he really had to.

'Why?'

Carol shrugged this time. 'I dunno. You gotta.'

'That's a bit unfair, isn't it?' Steve asked. 'I mean... I got you guys. You're a girl, and Tommy's a guy, and you're both my best friend, so it seems a little stupid that I gotta choose if I wanna be with guys or girls the rest of my life. Nobody's ever made me choose between you two, so why do I need to choose who I wanna make out with more? That's not fair. It's not fair, and I don't like it.'

'Have you even made out with a guy?'

Tommy's question made Steve pause. He dared to glance sideways, half expecting to find him laughing at him, but he wasn't. The question seemed built on genuine curiosity. Steve began a shrug, because that's what he usually did when he was trying to deflect an embarrassing question, but he wound up shaking his head instead. There was a gentle quietness between them, just the heavy thrum of the radiator at the far end of the room filling the air.

'Then how do you know?'

'Duh. How did *you* know you liked girls before you made out with one?'

'Okay. Point. Science.'

And Steve probably ought to have guessed it would happen, as Tommy tended to do things like this. He'd tried to stick his tongue to a street lamp his first winter in Hawkins. He'd sat in a steaming tub with a new pair of jeans on and forced Steve to watch in case they grew too tight. He'd have thrown a VHS into the fireplace if Steve hadn't talked him out of it.

But this wasn't a street lamp or a new pair of jeans or *Animal House*. This was Tommy kissing him, and the first thing that popped into

Steve's head was *stubble*. And then, in order, it was *Tommy* and *mouth* and *firm* and *stubble* again, because yeah, women didn't really have stubble. Then *wine*, *Tommy*, *rough* and, for good measure, *shit*, *I hope Carol isn't pissed*. But when Steve jerked back, and at some point he'd moved onto his elbows, which was probably a good thing as kissing while laying down was sort of a pain in the ass, Carol was just watching with a quizzical expression, like when she had a piece of juicy gossip and she was just waiting for someone to ask. Unfortunately for Carol, patience had never been her strongest point, and Steve was suddenly beset with another mouth on his, and girls were a subject he was much more familiar with when it came to kissing.

Despite rumours stating the contrary, he and Carol had never kissed. They'd been best friends all throughout elementary school, despite his parents trying to coerce him into a better social circle, even at six. But he and Carol had bonded almost instantly, sharing secrets and brownies and permanent markers. She told him about how her mother got pregnant and he told her about how his mother told him that his parents never had sex any more. But they'd never kissed.

And now they had. And it was okay, if a little weird, and Carol was studying him, squinting the way she did when she was trying to figure out if she wanted to make a joke or not. Then, she leant over him, and kissed Tommy, deeper, with tongue, and for a second Steve could swear he saw them both open their eyes and look over at him.

'Tommy's better,' she announced.

'Yeah, I agree,' Steve shot back. 'You were a little dry. Like a saltine.'

'A little- you ass- '

Carol flung herself on him. With a laugh, Steve fell back, crashing into Tommy, his hands flying up to press against Carol's shoulders. Her mouth was in his again, and this time it was a little easier, a little less awkward, when her tongue slipped between his lips. Although a voice in Steve's head pointed out that he was kissing Tommy's girlfriend right in front of him, he suspected this wasn't a huge problem. For one, Tommy's breath was against his cheek. Secondly, when Steve turned to ask if this was fine, he wasn't given time to ask,

as he was being kissed, quite certainly, by him. This was a little more awkward, as Steve was fairly sure that Tommy didn't have a lick of interest in guys the way he did, but there was still a level of eagerness there, an interest that Steve recognised within himself. All that mattered was that he was being pushed back towards Carol, who took Tommy's place, and then Tommy was kissing Carol, before turning back to Steve, and Steve really wasn't feeling like a third wheel. Sure, it wasn't *Thriller*, but this was almost just as good, and Dane Matthews sure as hell wasn't going to find out about it.

When Steve finally wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, his lips tender to touch, kiss-swollen and a little bruised, he felt more confused than ever. He could taste Carol and Tommy and red wine, and he really loved that Neil Diamond song and he'd die for a cover version of it. He was out of breath, and he bent his legs a little so nobody could see that he was a little hard.

'Tommy's still better. But he's my boyfriend and you're not, so you're just gonna need to cut your losses, Stevie.'

'Blow me, Carol,' Steve drawled, rolling his eyes.

She laughed and crawled onto the couch, tossing the blanket up over her.

'Go ask Sammy Grey,' she sang, reaching over to snatch the pillow out from under him. '*Ohh*, Sammy- '

'Shut up!' he protested with a laugh.

It was genuine, his hands over his face as he chuckled, because the teasing was well-meaning, and Tommy was joining in with a false moan, calling out Sammy's name and jabbing Steve right between the ribs. The mocking was the same as when he said he hit third base with Amy, when he felt up Laurie, and the only thing that had changed was the name.

The laughter quietened down, and Steve rolled into his side, an arm tucked under his head. Tommy got up to switch off the lights, and Steve stole the pillow; Tommy had already grabbed an extra cushion when he returned. He listened as his friend settled down, stretched

out beside him, and gave a soft, relaxed sigh.

'I'm thinking of trying out for basketball. Think I'll make the team?'

'Yeah, you should do it, man. We'd probably be on the same team. Only juniors get on the A-team,' Steve said softly.

'Less likely to get your teeth knocked out,' Carol chimed in. 'Pop says it's only a matter of time before you get a stick to the face.'

Steve wasn't awake by the time Tommy's mother came home. He was curled up on his side, one arm flung over Tommy, while Carol's arm hung over the side of the couch and rested on his shoulder. There was no trace of a hangover the next morning, his mouth filled with the remnants and memories of tipsy kisses.

*

Steve had been friends with Carol since the end of first grade. It wasn't exactly cool, for a boy to be friends with a girl, but she was mad into horses, and Steve's grandparents owned a ranch, and Carol took riding lessons there. She had never known her father, which had always struck Steve with a deep curiosity, and she and her mother lived with her grandparents as a result. They were the ones who paid for Carol's horse riding lessons, after Steve blabbered to them about it the first time he had met them. Over the years, Steve and Carol had formed a quiet camaraderie. Rumours circulated about them, which at first was annoying, and then sort of cool as it meant Steve started getting attention from girls, and boys started to leave Carol alone, which she preferred.

Puberty had hit her like a brick at eleven. She'd developed breasts before acne, and her first period struck all over his parent's couch. After a momentary panic from both of them, Steve had managed to find one of his mother's sanitary belts. When neither of them could figure out how to use it, he'd handed her a roll of toilet paper, found some cash in his mother's jewellery box, and made the trip down to the store to find something easier for her to use.

Tommy transferred halfway through sixth grade. He was from somewhere east of Indianapolis, which was exotic and intriguing. He

had as many freckles as Carol did, which Steve never failed to point out with an elbow to the ribs, though Carol had taken to wearing make-up to cover them by that point. Steve was paired with him for a science project, and although Tommy wasn't all that keen on science at the time, they did a kickass poster on the skeletal system, which Steve still had in the attic somewhere. Tommy was living with his grandmother at the time, while his folks got their shit together and moved over. Carol began to talk to him about what it was like to live with her grandparents, and Steve talked about how his parents fought, as Tommy revealed his own liked to argue.

Steve eventually got Tommy to ask Carol out, who had been nursing a pretty bad crush on him. He never felt like a third wheel on their dates, and had even crawled on top of the lockers and dangled an invite to the Sadie Hawkins dance in front of Tommy in eighth grade so Carol could race up from behind and surprise him. The two-day suspension had been worth it, even if his father had chewed him out for a solid week and reminded him of what a disappointment he could be. Steve cared more about his friends than himself, and although he sometimes wondered if that was indicative of something darker that he didn't want to acknowledge, he tried not to stew on it too much. Tommy and Carol occasionally set him up with girls, though he never found himself clicking with them as much as he did his friends. They were a distraction and were more interested in his popularity and his family's money, while Tommy and Carol liked him for his personality, peculiar interests and the general concept of *Steve* than the *Harrington* part of his being. They didn't even mind that sometimes his parents loudly fought while they slept over. Steve couldn't see any other girl tolerating the same behaviour. Although his mother often said that she had simply forgotten that Steve was having friends over, he couldn't help but feel that it was a subtle punishment for him associating with a pair that were considered undesirable.

*

In the weeks after the post-Christmas sleepover, Steve had begun to wonder if maybe he had drunkenly imagined the whole thing. He knew the whole idea was preposterous. One bottle of wine between three teenagers wouldn't get any of them drunk, and he had been

clear-headed enough to even remember his warbling rendition of 'Heroes'. He'd even take a pass on some of the events being collectively remembered more than others, such as Tommy elbowing him whenever Sammy Grey entered the locker rooms after practice. But as Valentine's Day crept closer, a day that Steve loved and loathed in equal amounts, Steve began to feel like maybe things weren't as forgotten as he'd thought.

They cornered him on a Monday, four days before Valentine's. Steve hated Mondays, and not just because he related to Garfield on an intimate level. The basketball season had ended, which meant he was doing baseball instead, but practice was on Wednesdays. He only had one class with Carol, but that was English, and they sat on opposite sides of the class, due to the teacher's insistence on alphabetical seating. The only time they got to see each other was during lunch, and forty-five minutes wasn't nearly enough time to catch up with one another over everything that had occurred between Sunday afternoon and Monday afternoon. So it wasn't until after school, while he was trying to decide whether he wanted to head home and enjoy a few hours of peace or maybe grab a milkshake from the diner, that he slammed his locker door shut for the last time that day and found Tommy and Carol closing in on him.

'We want to take you out on Valentine's,' Carol announced.

Steve eyed them, slipping the lock back in place. It clicked shut and he gave it a firm tug, having the distinct feeling that he had joined the conversation two minutes too late. Unable to figure out what to say, he finally said a rather firm 'huh', which seemed to break the ice a little.

'Well, this Saturday,' Tommy clarified. 'Mom'll kill me if I'm not home to watch Annie.'

'Valentine's is for couples,' Steve finally said, glad he'd figured out how the English language worked.

'Duh. We're a couple, and we want to spend it with you.'

Steve eyed Carol dubiously. It wasn't that he doubted her. He trusted both of them, but Valentine's had never quite sat well with Steve.

Ever since he'd started dating, as a chubby-cheeked, bespectacled teen, with a mouthful of metal and an awful haircut, he'd always found himself single come February. He longed to have someone to fawn over on that damn commercialised holiday, but he'd also huff to anyone who would dare to listen how ridiculous it was, and that if he were dating someone then he'd want them to understand he'd shower them with affection every single day of the year, not just one randomly chosen day. Some people bought into it, though, and while it surprised him that Tommy and Carol would, his two best friends whose names ran into each other so they became Tommy-and-Carol, he didn't want to begrudge them by making them feel as though they had to spend time with him so he'd forget his crippling singledom.

'It's fine, guys. Seriously,' he said, hitching his backpack onto a shoulder.

'We'll say it's my birthday present,' Tommy suggested.

'Uh, your birthday's not until March.'

'Early birthday present, then.'

'The *middle* of March.'

Rolling his eyes, Steve began heading down the corridor. Tommy slipped to his left, Carol to his right. She took his arm, the way she was always wont to do, and Tommy tossed his arm over Steve's shoulders. He had to stretch a little, given their height difference, and Steve found himself hunching the way he tended to do to accommodate him. The idea of going out with the pair was appealing, if only because he loved to do anything with them. But the excuse of Valentine's rubbed on him, and not in the way he was jonesing for.

'C'mon, we'll take you out to see that new Harrison Ford movie.'

'*Blade Runner*? That's not going to be released for, like, another four months,' he said, eyeballing Tommy.

'Unless you were asking someone else,' Tommy continued, talking over the end of Steve.

'Like a certain lacros- '

'*Shhh*ut up!' Steve hissed, elbowing Carol as they left the building. He could see a few eyes darting their way, curious.

Carol laughed, her head tossed back. The clouds had briefly parted in the cool February air, along a sliver of sunlight to shine down upon the parking lot. None of them had a car yet, though Steve's father had promised him his current vehicle when he got a new one after summer. Even so, the three of them didn't really mind walking, and Steve relished these moments after a droll Monday.

'Dear Sam- '

Before Carol could get much further, Steve let out a loud cry of mocking anguish and wrestled free of them. Carol's cackling laughter followed him as he began to run, arms flailing as he heard the patter of feet behind him. There was a holler as he and a whoop as he pushed past several students, some he recognised, and then a following shout as Tommy began to catch up.

'C'mon, Stevie boy, you can run faster than that!'

Steve's bag was grabbed and he was tugged backwards. He was a basketball player; his style was more short bursts, sprinting from one end of the court to the other. He wasn't like Tommy, accustomed to running the length of the field for lacrosse. Tossing his arms above his head in defeat, he allowed himself to get dragged about, letting Tommy and Carol's laugh fill him. Their glee carried him the rest of the way home, as he finally agreed to go along with whatever harebrained scheme they had in mind. He'd never said no to them before, and he wasn't about to start now.

*

Carol had wanted to be a vet since she was eight-years-old. She had an uncanny, unwavering determination that Steve had always admired. There was an unmatched certainty that carried her through. Even when adults, both well-meaning and otherwise, would gently remind her that she would have to put down sick and injured animals, she would nod and say she was aware of that, but

sometimes it was the kindest thing to do. She wanted to work on large animals, like horses, and that living with a broken leg was cruel. Steve's grandparents, who exchanged riding lessons for Carol helping to muck out the stables and other cleaning duties, were delighted to have her around, and she'd tail them whenever one of the mares were pregnant. Steve's mother, their daughter, didn't understand and felt like she was eating into their money.

Tommy, on the other hand, was less certain with what he wanted to do with his future. He knew what subjects he liked (English, geography and art) and he knew which subjects he disliked (algebra, chemistry and civics), and was often flip-flopped from one idea to the next whenever a discussion about his future came up. He wasn't even sure if he wanted to go to college, and that someone needed to be around to keep an eye on Annie if his dad fucked off again. Beyond that, he knew he wanted to follow Carol wherever she wanted to go, and help her see her dream of becoming a vet. It all seemed very romantic, but that was Tommy all over. Close to Carol, close to his family, and open to whatever was thrown his way.

Then there was Steve. He didn't know what he was going to do. His father had told him often enough that he needed to smarten up his grades if he intended to go to college. Steve didn't think his 3.1 GPA was awful, and it was mostly his math grade that was getting it that high. He knew, though, if he stayed in Hawkins, he'd be stuck working for his father and living a mediocre life. The closest community college that had more on offer than floral arrangement and bookkeeping was in Bloomington, which was far enough away that he'd have an excuse to leave home. Community college, though, according to his folks, was for losers and slackers who were never going to achieve anything in life. The words stung and burrowed their way in, which left his mind a muddle. If his parents were to be believed, he wouldn't make it to college and the only job he'd be able to secure would be photocopying documents in his father's office.

*

They took him to see *Making Love* on Saturday. Steve hadn't heard about it and the cinema only had four other patrons; he was only glad for the company, and the excuse to devour a box of popcorn. He was only half watching the movie, until the g-word was dropped and

his eyes suddenly shot up to the screen. Wide-eyed, popcorn falling from his fingers and sticking to his lower lip, Steve watched transfixed for the next couple of hours. Although the word *gay* didn't sit right with him, *curious* did, and he felt himself attaching the word to himself. 'Hi, I'm Steve, I'm *curious*.' Yes, that could work.

Although the movie itself was dry, Steve latched onto Zack. He leant forward in his seat, pulling his knees up to his chest as he set the empty box of popcorn on the seat beside him. With arms around his legs, he perched his chin on his knees and watched the movie, licking salt and butter from his fingertips. This sort of thing wasn't played out in films, and it certainly was played in films that showed in Hawkins. But here they were, with two older men in the audience and a couple of curious women up the back (curious, or *curious?*), and Tommy and Carol had taken him to see it, and he was alight with energy when they left.

'That was- oh my god, did you guys *know?*' Steve blathered, waving his hands as they walked to the diner at the end of the block.

'My mom told me about it,' Carol said with an easy shrug.

'I don't get why she had to give up her career to have a kid,' Tommy said, his hands deep in his pockets and his face turned to the sun. 'My mom would hate that.'

'My mom would hate the whole movie,' Steve said quietly.

The three crowded into one side of a booth when they reached the diner. It was an old habit from their middle school days. They could barely fit then, and they certainly couldn't now. Tommy sat squished against the window, Steve in middle, with Carol hanging off the edge with one leg dangling out. They ordered their usual assortment; Tommy liked his burgers with extra bacon, Steve had extra malt in his milkshake, and Carol only ever picked at the fries, piled high with ketchup. This was a ritual the three of them shared after every movie they saw, their legs stretched out and feet resting upon the seat in front of them. It was a companionable silence, one that never felt awkward or strained. Their knees and feet would bump under the table, their elbows would dig into ribs and waists, and if Steve found Carol's hand resting on his thigh or Tommy's knuckles pressed to his

wrist, then it was simply the close proximity. He tried not to think about it, nor let it linger too much.

They went back to Carol's, as she was the closest and her grandparents were out. Steve liked her house. Photographs lined the walls, several generations worth of Ducketts marking the passage of time as they headed to her bedroom. Even the posed photos seemed genuine, unlike the carefully picked photos that sat in frames on shelves in Steve's home. Those photos were stiff, with smiles that never quite reached the eyes. In Carol's home, everybody beamed and radiated happiness. One photo even had the three of them, pressed cheek-to-cheek at Carol's fourteenth birthday, buttercream smeared over their lips, noses and fingers. Steve always looked over at it when he entered her home, taking his time to appreciate the fact that he was welcome here, that he and Tommy both had a place on the mantelpiece.

Carol kissed him first. It was an act of permission. Seated on her bed, his shoes kicked off, Steve felt her cool hands cup his face and guide their mouths together. He'd almost been expecting it. Tommy sat to his right, and the moment Carol lifted her hands, Steve turned to him, seeking out his lips. His hand fluttered over Tommy's chest and stomach, before coming to rest on his knee. There was a shivering, uncertain breath, untainted by red wine, until he felt the stiffness melt from Tommy's body.

There was a soft, but pressing, hand to his shoulder. He was guided down onto his back, two pairs of hands running over his chest. A thousand questions sprang into Steve's head as his shirt was pushed up, his face kissed, his hair stroked. Most of them started with why and how, but no suitable answers were forthcoming. He didn't dare ask, either, not when Tommy was kissing his neck, and he knew, he *knew*, that Steve enjoyed it, after admitting to it several months ago in a game of Truth or Dare. He kicked out a leg, whimpered, and squeezed at Carol's thigh as he bit back a breathless moan.

The cotton of his shirt was dragged up and Steve felt the smooth, flower-printed duvet on his back. Lifting his head and shoulders, he sucked in a breath as his shirt was heaved over his head. The air in the bedroom was cool and his skin prickled with it. Scrambling backwards towards the wall, he felt Tommy's arms close around him

as he was coaxed to lean up against him. A firm chest was pressed to his back, legs either side of his, and Tommy was *there*, hands over his chest, his nipples, his belly. A mouth to the back of his neck, over his hairline and temple, and Carol was in front of him. She pulled her blouse up, over her head, and tossed it aside. Her bra, pink and white, caught his eye, and he couldn't help but run his thumb under a strap, feeling the elastic press against his thumb.

Somebody said his name, a soft whisper of it. Steve couldn't say who; maybe it was both of them. His head tilted to the side, offering his neck up to Tommy, who had found the spot just under his jaw that made him writhe and squirm. Hands stroked his chest, his shoulders, as Carol kissed him, swallowing the noises he made before they had a chance to fill the room. She sat astride his thighs, her heels digging into his knees. A turn of his head had him kissing Tommy, another slight shift and it was Carol. Bitten fingernails he knew to be Tommy's raked down his body, and he shivered and arched up as they skimmed the waistline of his jeans. They didn't go any lower, but they could, they *could*, and Steve wouldn't fight it.

For several minutes he was lost in a sea of hot mouths, against his neck, his jaw, his hairline. Lips skimmed together and tongues brushed, a hand on his jaw directing him up to Carol, and then back so he could turn and find Tommy. His hands ran up along Carol's bare waist and over her ribs, not quite daring to go any higher until Tommy took his hand and placed it over her left breast. Although he'd been with girls before, far more than Tommy, whose count lingered on a solitary digit, none of them had been Carol- and none of them had been under these circumstances. He turned to look at Tommy, twisting his neck to see him, but his mouth was soon claimed in a kiss, and Carol was taking her turn at his throat, his hand flat against her breast. He shivered between them, unable to help himself, and dared not to move lest it shatter and fall apart.

The echo of the front door being shut broke them away from one another. Steve whipped his head to the direction of the bedroom door as Carol made a frustrated little noise from the back of her throat. She heaved herself off, directing the two of them to 'stay there', and lurched off the bed. She grabbed her blouse and pulled it back over her head as she stomped off, with a level of annoyance that Steve

knew well when she was getting her way.

Watching her leave, he wondered if he ought to move away from Tommy. It only now began to creep up on him that a low thrum of arousal was coursing through him, having been muted by the foreignness of the situation. Now, though, leaning back against Tommy, he could feel it settling in, low in his belly. Tommy's fingers had yet to leave the waist of his jeans, fingertips grazing the sensitive skin that lay underneath, just touching along the edge of his briefs. Now would be a good time to move, for either of them; Carol wasn't there to act as a go-between. Even so, Steve didn't move, staying nestled between Tommy's thighs.

'Did you plan all this?' he finally dared to ask.

'The movie was Carol's idea.'

'Oh.'

It was then that he felt a careful press of lips to the back of his neck. The kiss was soft, a little uncertain, but Steve remained still. His eyelids fluttered shut as he let out a careful breath, not quite daring to move. The fingertips that had dared to settle under his waistband curled somewhat, just a fraction of movement as Tommy kissed the length of his neck, from the base of his scalp to the top of his collar. His skin prickled with the delicate movements, his breath coming out in a short puff as he sat still, not wanting to disturb Tommy.

Outside the bedroom, there was a soft pad of feet and the sound of the knob turning. Tommy lifted his head and Steve opened his eyes, just as Carol stuck her head in.

'Meemaw's making apricot chicken tonight. You guys wanna stick around?'

Steve nodded, not quite ready to move yet. Tommy, though, was shifting back, and his hand had slipped out from his jeans. Although he still felt warm all over and didn't quite want to leave the bed just yet, he willed himself up. When he dared to look back, Tommy's cheeks were a soft shade of pink. He met Steve's eyes just once, before pulling his shirt out from his jeans and tugging it down, before

he went to follow Carol to greet her grandparents.

*

The first time Tommy and Carol both slept over was September 22nd, the year after Tommy transferred to Hawkins. It was a Saturday, and Steve's birthday was the following day. His parents had asked if he wanted to throw a bigger party, the kind with balloons and cake, and it was still warm enough to go for a swim in the pool. But Steve had screwed up his nose, shook his head, and asked instead if he and his friends could go down to the cinema by themselves. It had taken a little convincing (particularly as Carol was turning into a 'little woman' as his mother said, on account of her finding out about the period incident), but they'd finally relented. Besides, Steve was turning thirteen, and he could skip out on having a party if that's what he wanted.

The day itself had been fairly simple, but he had had the best time. The three of them rode their bikes downtown and saw a rather forgettable horror film called *The Legacy*, which was rather gruesome but not in a fun way. They ate at the local diner, in what would be a recurring theme with their shared meals. By the time they got home, there was enough sunlight for them to swim in the pool, music blaring over the radio as they dunked one another. Steve lost his shorts at one stage, and he snapped the back of Carol's bikini in retaliation, only for her cheeks to turn hot with anger and embarrassment as it fell open. A quick apology soothed her pubescent humiliation, and Tommy covered her with a towel as Steve retied the strap. He'd always associate Supertramp with his birthday after that, singing along loudly to soothe Carol's pubescent embarrassment.

Looking back, Steve couldn't remember what either of them gave him as a gift. He knew his mother baked a cake, which was a rarity in of itself, and that Carol had brought him her usual cookies, as she was always wound up doing. At least one photo had been taken, as he had it stuck on his wardrobe door. What he remembered most of all was creating a blanket fortress in the middle of his bedroom, until the three of them were cocooned in fabric with a warm light filling the space. Tommy and Carol weren't dating yet, though Steve could pick up their flirtations; even so, he was wrangled into sleeping between them, on account of him being the birthday boy. Somehow that, too,

never changed.

That night his parents fought. The lamp had been switched off, and the three of them were gossiping about someone. Steve didn't remember who, but he felt it was someone in the year below them. The sound of yelling cut through their quiet whispers like a knife, though, and their voices faltered. Holding his breath, Steve instinctively grit his teeth and shut his eyes tight, a wave of dread crashing into him like a tidal wave. It wasn't clear what they were arguing about, though Steve heard his name brought up a handful of times.

Insults rained and were shot back and forth. *Pathetic* and *loser* and *disappointment*, as well as a few choice words that would have him suspended from school. At one point there was a crash, and from the distance, Steve could pinpoint them to the living room. He couldn't hear either of his friends breathing. But as a sardonic drawl wound its way through the floor ('oh, well done Robert, look what you did'), Steve felt Tommy's arm wrap around his middle and pull him back against his chest. Carol wriggled in closer at his front, her head nuzzling in under his chin.

'Oh my God, did you see what Barbara Holland was wearing yesterday? What's the deal with those ruched collars?' Carol asked quietly, her voice muffled by Steve's chest.

'Who?'

'Barbara. In the year below us. Sorta tall, dumpy, red hair with freckles? Hangs around with this weird skinny girl.'

'No, you're describing Tommy,' Steve teased, which earned him a swift kick in the ankle.

Their voices didn't block out the yelling, and Steve still felt a pang when the argument downstairs died down into silence. But neither Tommy nor Carol let him go, and when he woke up in the morning, he found himself draped over one, with the other nestled against his chest.

According to his parents, Nancy Wheeler was capital-A Acceptable, unlike Carol, whose mother had been knocked up as a teenager, and Tommy whose father was off doing God knows what with God knows who. Nancy's parents were still together, thankfully, and she was perfectly polite and minded her *ps* and *qs*. Steve learned all this the way home from Easter Sunday mass, one of the very few events that they attended as a family. It was also one of the few times they went to church, the only other time being Christmas. Steve recognised Nancy from a couple of parties here and there, and she'd always struck him as being a bit of a bookworm and up herself. He also knew for a fact that Carol hated her on account of Nancy calling her a slut one time in the girl's bathroom. But Steve nodded and shrugged and agreed when his father brought her up, seeing as it meant an argument was avoided. When her name got brought up again- 'who's party is it? Will the Wheeler girl be there?'- he had shrugged and say maybe to try to get off the topic.

It became a joke between him and Tommy and Carol, whenever one of them wanted to change the subject. The name *Nancy* began to mean *boring* and it was fun because Nancy represented boring, with her pleated skirts and pink shirts and studious nature. She was pretty and plain and if Steve smiled at her, it was simply because of an in-joke with Tommy and Carol and had absolutely nothing to do with *her* and *approval* and *no arguments*. At parties, he spoke to her simply so he'd have something to report back to his parents, which would keep him off his back. That was all.

At some point in his high school years, Steve had developed a reputation for being a bit of a flirt. He didn't know where it came from, and he wasn't sure if he liked it. He was friendly to everyone, and made an attempt to get to know people before jumping to rash conclusions. But people- namely his fellow female peers- took his kindness and well-meaning personality for romantic interest. Teachers called him cheeky, adults collectively dubbed him sassy, and girls called him flirty. And if Nancy took his slightly tipsy conversation at parties as flirting, then that was on her, not him. He was just keeping up appearances for society as a whole. Nobody needed to know that he had pined after Sammy Grey after he moved to Missouri, and that he'd only had real sex with two other girls, and that sometimes and Tommy and Carol made out on a semi-regular

basis and that sometimes Tommy would get hard and grind against him and Steve had fingered Carol and nobody, *nobody*, except Tommy and Carol needed to know that he'd maybe sort of probably creamed his pants after a particularly heated make out session with the two of them.

Carol was furious, though she bit her tongue. Steve could feel it simmering underneath, though, her remarks biting and harsh whenever her name would come up. Tommy, driven by a low-laying protectiveness, pulled Steve aside more than once and quietly asked if he was serious. The name *Nancy* began to mean *backstabber* and *petty* and *awful*. With a wave of his hand, Steve began to shy away from the burgeoning arguments, unable to handle both his father and his best friends eager for a fight with him, suggesting maybe Nancy had been talking about someone else- wasn't there a Carol in the freshman year, too?- and that she really wasn't that dull, and really, they just had to get to know her. The party at his house was meant to get everybody on the same page. And yeah, Barbara really was a drag, but for one night- *one night*- he and Tommy and Carol and Nancy were on the same page.

And Tommy and Carol agreed.

And Nancy showed she really wasn't that boring.

And then it happened.

It all happened.

While he had never felt like a third wheel in Tommy and Carol's relationship, it was bizarre to feel that way in his own with Nancy. Somewhere, deep down, he knew he'd always been the runner's up prize. He would catch her staring off in the distance during lunch, he'd listen to her bring up Jonathan's name with a wistful catch in her voice, he'd try to ignore the way she'd turn away from him after they'd been intimate.

In a way he supposed he did the same thing. He'd watch Tommy and Carol in class, he'd talk about them to Nancy, their names running together to become Tommy-and-Carol, he'd curl up around Nancy after sex and remember how Tommy would press up from behind and

how Carol would dance her long fingernails up his arm. He tried to not begrudge them too much when they moved onto a new crowd, the degenerates and the dropkicks, whose parents were all separated or divorced, who smoked publicly and listened to loud music.

He tried not to, at any rate. He didn't even know Billy. Just that he ached and avoided looking as Tommy and Carol attached themselves to him. Bitterness filled his mouth like blood, until the two blended together and he got to know a part of Billy far better than he ever wanted to.

Word got around about the fight quicker than he expected. He missed school on Tuesday. He found out later that Billy had, too. Having already been in a brawl with Jonathan, he thought he knew what to expect. His head had hurt for several days after that fight, and his nose had pained him for a good few weeks, but he'd recovered well enough. This time, though, the world swam and he found it difficult to get out of bed. Nausea clung to him, and he broke out in a cold sweat whenever he tried to move. The bathroom became his sanctuary with its cold tiles and solid ground and close proximity to the toilet. His folks were out of town until the weekend, and he longed and dreaded for their return in equal amounts.

He missed school Wednesday. The bruises around his eyes became black, and his left swelled to a slit. It took nearly twenty minutes to wash his face, carefully dabbing it with a cloth. In the end, he sat under the shower and lifted his face to the spray in short intervals. Dustin and Max stopped by, and it hurt to smile. His upper lip wouldn't behave, and his left cheek didn't quite move when he spoke. Max sat in silence, several shades of uncomfortable, before finally throwing a 'thanks' his way, and disappeared after Dustin told him to call if he needed anything. Steve was already dizzy and not quite following the conversation, but he agreed because people tended to like it when he did that.

Tommy and Carol stopped by Thursday morning. They studied each other like a Mexican standoff, and finally Steve stumbled backwards from the large, red door because the colour hurt his eyes and his head still pounded if he stood up for too long and the stair case was right there so he may as well use it as a seat, which he did.

'You look like shit.'

Carol always had a knack for stating the obvious.

One of them shut the door and the other one walked over. It was Tommy whose hands Steve tried to bat away, but wound up accepting as they turned his head this way and that until Steve squawked, which made his headache even worse, and all he wanted to do was *sleep*. He was heaved to his feet and led into the living room. Somebody guided him onto the couch, a pillow was carefully placed under his head, and when he found himself being lightly shaken awake, it was to a glass of water and a painkiller. Steve recognised the tablet as being one of Carol's mother's, after she'd gotten into a car accident. She still had residual pain.

'You need to go to a doctor.'

'Hnngh.'

'There's a walk-in clinic over in Bloomington. C'mon, we'll take you there.'

'Mm-mm.'

'Is it true you did that Star Trek death grip on Billy?'

At that, Steve eyed Tommy. Frowning hurt too much, and he was a little bewildered by how many facial expressions used his nose. So he shrugged, groaned again because his neck really hurt, and tried not to enjoy the way that slight noise of pain caused the two of them to lean in to see where he hurt. Carol's hand rested on his, while Tommy's sat just above his knee. At some point he drifted off again, the painkiller a lot stronger than the Tylenol he had been taking.

The next time he woke up- actually woke up and not just drifted into consciousness the way he had been for the past few days- he was in the back seat of a car with his head in someone's lap and long, red hair sitting in the driver's seat. For several long, horrifying seconds he expected to see Max driving and to smell gasoline. Instead, he was greeted by Tommy's freckled cheeks. He gurgled his acknowledgement to whatever was said to him, and placed Tommy's

cool hand against his brow to settle his churning stomach.

A nurse at the Bloomington clinic ushered him in ten minutes after their arrival. Tommy and Carol sat side-by-side in the waiting room, with matching expressions of concern on their face. Steve was summarily undressed, examined and laid down on a bed while a machine whirled around him and noisily took photos of his head. He ignored the questions about the assailant and pointed at areas that hurt. More questions about the assailant were asked, along with queries about the whereabouts of his parents. He shrugged at that and remarked that his father worked long hours and he promised to have him call when he was back in town. With the swelling as severe as it was, there was no way to clearly tell how badly his nose was broken, nor the extent of the rest of the damage; the results of the scan would take a week to arrive.

Carol drove them home, with Steve's head back on Tommy's lap. He dozed, with a fresh script of painkillers and anti-inflammatories to tide him over. On the radio came a trembling guitar, a beat he recognised and the soft, crooning tones of meeting Death late at night. Steve sighed and turned his face towards Tommy's stomach, his breathing evening out as his hair was brushed from his bruised features. He didn't picture Billy to look like Death. No, Death lived underground, in a world that was flipped on its axis. It smelt of rot and mildew and was home to beasts that didn't belong in the light of day.

By the time *Jeopardy!* rolled around, the painkillers had mostly worn off. Nausea had been replaced with hunger for something mild. Tommy prepared something he called Viking death soup, which seemed to involve little more than beef stock, brown onions and pepper. Steve sipped it cautiously, but it stayed down. The mild flavour didn't hurt his nose, and the lack of anything solid meant he didn't need to worry about hurting his jaw by chewing.

'It was all Annie would eat when she had gastro. Thought it might help.'

The right side of Steve's mouth twitched into a smile, but it hurt to do much else. The whiplash the doctor had diagnosed him with (amongst a number of other injuries) meant he had to move slowly. It

would take a few days to resolve itself, and once it had and the swelling and bruise to the back of his head reduced in size, he'd stop feeling so dizzy and nauseated. Until then, he had to stay off his feet and keep his head and feet elevated.

'You wanna talk about it?'

'Nah.'

The pause bordered on uncomfortable. Steve slowly ate, the spoon clinking the side of the bowl. His vision was no longer blurry, thankfully, and he could see Tommy and Carol eyeballing each other. Clearing his throat, he rested the bowl on the armrest of the couch and wiped his mouth gingerly with the napkin he'd been given.

'He was laying into a kid. One of his sister's friends. I stepped in.'

'Seriously?'

Steve eyed Tommy as well as he could. 'Do I look like I'm in a position to be talking shit?'

That was answer enough.

*

The most common excuse Steve gave people was that his father happened to have a lot of business meetings out of town, which was why he got home so late. That was half true, in that his father was out of town a lot, and that he happened to get home quite late. However, it was an open secret in the Harrington household that his father's business meetings were typically of quite a different kind than the sort where suits and ties were worn. Steve had been made aware of this from quite a young age, though he didn't fully understand what he'd walked in on until he was thirteen, and he didn't actually understand the ramifications of it until he was fifteen. A part of him still lived in a blissful world of denial, and he frequently used humour to hide behind it.

His mother, on the other hand, was a functional alcoholic. She worked part-time as a real estate agent, more to keep herself busy and away from the bottle during most daylight hours. It was a

strange concept, trying to compare his mother to the drunkards he'd see on TV, slurring and crashing their cars and hurling abuse every which way. His mother would sit in the bathtub for an hour or so, drinking and crying in alternating bouts. Sometimes, when she'd towelled off and the alcohol had hit her system, she'd call Steve to watch TV with her, and he'd sit on one end of the couch and listen to her ramble about his father and their sex life (or lack thereof) and what a disappointment Steve was and really, he needed to buckle down in school. Although a part of Steve suspected this wasn't completely normal, he had little else to compare it to and ultimately tried not to mull too much over it.

Every afternoon when he came home from school, he would hold his breath as the driveway came into view. A blue Vauxhall in the driveway would make his stomach twist in a push-pull of hope and anxiety that his mother was having a good day and was home simply because she had no home opens and not because she was inebriated. Things were often nice, if not outright pleasant, when it was just him and his mother, and Steve cherished those solitary moments. It made the drunken incidents somewhat more bearable.

A red Beemer, on the other hand, often made him toss up the possibility of doing another lap around the block. His father being home early on a school day was never a good sign. If he played his cards right, Steve could park at the end of the road and sit in his car for a good twenty to thirty minutes, doing his homework with his book on his lap or up against the steering wheel. Once the clock ticked 3:25PM, he'd pull quietly into the driveway and creep up to the door. He knew which floorboards creaked, which stairs had never been glued down properly and were a frequent source of frustration to his father. He'd slip upstairs as quietly as he was able and wait until he was called down for dinner.

The days where both cars were in the driveway when he got home, he'd keep on driving.

*

For six blissful hours on Saturday, his parents fawned on him. Molly stroked his brow and tucked him into bed, kissing his forehead with waxy lips. Robert paced back and forth at the foot of his bed, asking

for names and talking about lawyers, with the same cold anger that Steve so frequently found pointed towards him. He pretended to doze, if only to hear his parents whisper their mutual concern about his well-being and how upset they were, love dripping from their voices in a way he hadn't heard in years. It hurt to lay on his side, but he kept his head turned towards his mother all the same, catching the occasional waft of her strawberry-scented perfume. His father sat on the foot of his bed, and he listened as they discussed the police and wondered why Steve hadn't called. Jonathan's name got brought up twice, and Robert threatened to call Joyce again, have her son really put in handcuffs this time, but Molly dismissed it as rubbish, on account of the boy being, 'a bit of a shirtlifter.' Steve could make sense of the phrase, contextually, though he couldn't figure out what it had to do with him being in a fight.

By dinner, though, their concern had melted into frustration. Steve refused to name names. Pointing the finger at Billy would incite more trouble for Max. If he brought up Billy's name, he would need to explain why he was at the Byers house, which housed a quote-unquote shirtlifter. That was one road he didn't want to go down. The Byers had enough going on without a visit from the Harrington's lawyer, and he didn't want to get tarred with the same brush as Jonathan. Besides, dragging Billy through court would force Max to go along. That was Max's story to tell, when she was good and ready, if it ever happened. Steve already knew what it was like to be asked prying questions about family members; he didn't want to force that on her.

A pair of black eyes, a swollen, twisted nose and stitches in his bottom lip didn't stop his father spitting venomous words at him. Being eighteen was no excuse to take himself to the hospital, according to his mother. Somebody would need to pay the bill. And Steve nodded at that, understanding, and asked if he could finally go to bed.

Still, six hours of kindness from them was a lot more than he'd received in a while. If he shut his eyes, then he could replace Robert and Molly with Tommy and Carol, and temporarily close the gap that had grown between them over the past year.

Tommy and Carol came to visit on Sunday. They crowded into Steve's bedroom, their seventeen and eighteen-year-old bodies taking up more space than they had only two years earlier. Steve felt well enough to move about, though he still grew tired easily. The radio distracted him and hurt his head, but he liked to lay in his bed with the window open and listen as the wind blew outside. The first frost of winter had started to hit, and his window was kissed with ice in the morning.

He was laying in bed when they arrived. He heard the gentle creek of the third step, the whine of a floorboard outside the bathroom. Carol had a recognisable gait, a little heavy in the heels, and Tommy always knocked with a trill of his knuckles. Steve remained curled up in a ball, blinking at the window and watching as his curtains blew in the slightest breeze, until he heard Tommy call his name, a little quietly as though he might be asleep, and he finally groaned and gave an acknowledgement for them to come in. The door opened slowly, and Steve shut his eyes just in time to hear it click shut. He listened as the pair took their shoes off, something they had done since middle school and Steve had asked them to as his mother fussed if anything was scuffed in his room, and their socked feet padded to his bed.

The mattress dipped as they sat either side of him. Carol positioned herself in the curve between his thighs and belly, while Tommy stretched out on the bed behind him. Steve could feel the expanse of his body, not quite touching him, though Carol didn't bother with such courtesies and her cool hand rested on his cheek as she traced the line of his black eye with the edge of her thumb. It didn't hurt when she did it. His mother had fussed over him the day before, but her hands were too rough, too foreign. She didn't express her affection for him physically. Steve couldn't remember the last time he'd even been hugged by her.

He could, though, remember the last time he'd been held by both Tommy and Carol.

'We brought your homework,' Carol said quietly. 'We also brought ours so you can copy off it.'

'Except calculus,' Tommy added. 'We thought you might actually

want to do that.'

'That's 'cause you're not in calc,' Steve managed to reply, his voice sounding a little nasally to his ears.

'Yeah, but we nicked off with the marking guide for it. Chem, too.'

That caused Steve to open his eyes. He finally had his head in a comfortable position, one that didn't put so much pressure on the spot where there was a slight gash that had scabbed over before the nurses at the hospital could stitch it up. But Carol's face was filled with worry, and Tommy's hand kept tentatively playing with the hem of his shirt. With a grunt of pain, he braced one hand on the bed and eased himself up, waving off both of them before they could ask to help. With a sigh, he wriggled up the bed and leant back against the pillow and wall. Tommy rolled onto his stomach, while Carol continued to watch with that same, worried expression.

He told them he was going back to school on Monday. He told them that his parents were pissed he hadn't pointed fingers. He told them they didn't need to worry about him.

'You're our friend. Of course we're going to be worried about you, asshole.'

Steve tried his best to level Carol with a glare, but frowning hurt and sneering hurt and his left eye was still slightly swollen so any attempt at narrowing his eyes was wasted. In the end, he rested his head against the wall because that required less effort than using all the strength in his neck, and tried to ignore the way Tommy had nestled up beside him and had taken hold of his hand. He let out a tired puff of air and looked up at the ceiling instead.

'I thought you were friends with Billy.'

'For, like, a week,' Tommy replied. 'We barely knew the guy.'

And Steve couldn't really argue with that. Carol had started tracing the stripes along the edge of his shirt, while Tommy kept running his thumb over the healing cuts on Steve's knuckles. It felt so easy to just fall back into this, whatever it was. But worry, an old friend of Steve's

by now, twisted in his gut and he threw them both an uneasy look. There was a heavy noise downstairs, though Steve couldn't quite place what it was.

'You guys haven't told anyone, have you?'

'About what?'

Steve didn't have an immediate answer. About the fight. About stepping in to defend Max, about his love of math and his need to wear glasses. About his insecurities about the future. About Sammy Grey. About them, all of them. About him. About him, right there, quiet and alone and his shell broken down until he really didn't know who he was underneath. So he shrugged and rubbed his cheek on his shoulder.

And Tommy said, 'no.'

And Carol said, 'of course not.'

And Steve nodded, and he said so quietly he thought they'd not hear it, 'I miss you guys.'

But Tommy heard, and he replied, 'we miss you, too.'

At that, Carol pulled Steve into a hug. He fell forward and sighed, the last of his energy sapped as he turned his head to protect his nose and shut his eyes. To his left, Tommy leant in and held him from the back, the way he always did, the three of them coming together like puzzle pieces.

That week, Carol came by to pick him up each day in her grandparent's Oldsmobile. Before they drove off to pick up Tommy, she would gently dab cream and powder over the worst of his bruises, her careful hands turning his face this way and that until she was satisfied she'd done what she could. Her cool hands were as gentle as the nurses, and he told her as such. He liked the feeling of them. She said animals didn't care how gentle they were, but she appreciated the compliment all the same.

When they picked Tommy up, a paper bag was deposited in his lap. He opened it to find an egg salad sandwich, a small container of

home-made applesauce and a banana. He looked back at Tommy as he was getting comfortable in the back seat.

'Mom wanted to pack you something in case it still hurt when you ate,' he said as way of explanation.

Steve gave a lopsided grin, even though the left side of his face still didn't want to co-operate.

Although people inevitably stared and whispered behind their hands the first few days, nobody dared to approach and ask. Steve wondered briefly if they already knew. Billy's face had mostly healed up, and he skirted Steve like an untrusting snake. And while Steve couldn't spend all day bracketed by Tommy and Carol, they were there during lunch and after school, carrying the conversation and passing him their softer foods, until he huffed and stole the pizza from Tommy's plate, desperate for something to crunch.

Nancy went to approach him once. He saw her, out of the corner of his blackened eye. She stood at the end of the row of lockers, uncertain and uneasy, clutching her books to her chest. Lifting his chin, he went to look at her. Before their eyes could meet, she had run off. Steve felt sick, but decided it was the pizza had stolen. The cafeteria margherita had never sat right.

*

Annie, Tommy's younger sister, had always been a sickly thing. She had measles the year Tommy's family had moved to Hawkins, and developed mumps the following year. She contracted laryngitis each summer and pneumonia nearly every winter. After their parents separated and later divorced, Tommy took to watching her when she became sick. She was almost a full seven years younger than Tommy (a 'happy accident' according to his mother), and she became something of a younger sibling to both Carol and Steve, too. Steve had two older half siblings, but he only saw them when he went up to Chicago once a year, and had never quite gotten close to them.

While Carol fawned over animals and longed to be a vet, Tommy became quite adept at playing nursemaid. He would bandage their fingers when the skin was cut, he would disinfect open wounds and

take their temperature with the same ease he'd treat Annie. Despite his aptitude for treating his sister, though, Tommy had no real interest in medicine and would roll his eyes whenever one of them would suggest he think about making it a career. He had no interest in being a doctor, and guys couldn't be nurses he'd state with a level of certainty. The latter idea caused Carol to smack him over the back of the head and for Steve to tell him to not be an ass. Annie would just say he'd make a great nurse, and the three of them would jeer Tommy on.

Steve had no idea what he wanted to do after school. He only knew he wanted to remain close enough to Tommy and Carol so that he could visit them, but get far enough away that he could escape his parents guilt. Such a place didn't seem to exist. As his senior year went on, and his college applications remained partially filled out and unsent, he felt the gap in his future closing in and the Hawkins city limits begin to close in around him like a noose. It strangled him and threatened to drag him down.

It was Carol's mother who finally brought up community college in a positive way, unlike his parents would sneer and shake their head. She was back in Hawkins and working in Bloomington, a commute which took forty-five minutes each way, but she didn't want to uproot her daughter in her final year at school. She worked at the same clinic that Annie visited, although she didn't see her as her patient. Conflict of interest she said.

Alice had dropped out of school after falling pregnant and had completed her GED several years later. She'd gone to community college part-time, working on her diploma while Carol was in elementary and middle school. She'd had to learn how to study again, she explained, and although she had never been particularly interested in English at school, she found it had been a fairly safe topic to stick with. It let her figure out where she wanted to go and what she wanted to do. That had led into speech therapy, and by then, Carol was old enough to leave alone after school and her father, Carol's Pop, had retired.

Although Steve initially dismissed the idea, he found the two words- *community college*- spinning around his head, and if he swiped a few brochures from the career advisor's desk at school, then no one

needed to know.

*

They took turns wiping iodine over the cut on the back of Steve's head and bandaging his knuckles where the skin kept splitting. Carol deciphered the letter Steve received in the mail, while Tommy read over her shoulder-

-on examination there was tenderness over the nasal dorsum on the left and on intranasal examination a septal deformity to the left-

Tommy promised to drive him to his follow-up appointment in May, as per the doctor's advice. He said he'd get a recommendation from his mother, as Annie had had grommets put in a few years earlier and the surgeon had been quite good. Steve just shrugged, folded the letter up, and hid it away in his desk. It had become an undiscussed subject with his parents, like his father's infidelity and his mother's drinking habit.

In time, the bruises around his eyes faded. The swelling in his nose went down, though his septum remained twisted and he couldn't quite breathe. The skin around his knuckles went shiny white, and the scab on the back of his head fell off to leave a small indent. His nose bled in the morning, if he got up too fast, or if he pushed himself too hard playing basketball.

Nancy avoided him. Jonathan asked him quietly, in half-sentences, what had happened, and Steve gave him the same answer he gave everyone: nothing. Dustin latched onto him and Steve found himself a seat at the Henderson dinner table on Wednesday and Saturday nights. And, at some point, he discovered his circle beginning to rotate around Tommy and Carol again, who once more became Tommy-and-Carol, with Steve squished somewhere in the middle, sitting between the lines of that hyphenated 'and'. He liked that place, caught between the two of them in a realm of safety and familiarity.

Christmas and New Years passed by without incident. He was invited around to Carol's over New Years, but he went home before ten, too uneasy with a flood of memories to want to stick around for long. He tried to ignore how put out both of them looked, the gentle

encouragement by her grandparents and mother to stay. Valentine's was much the same, the date having become seared in his mind with hot kisses and cool hands.

Tommy's birthday couldn't be avoided, however. Steve had found himself a cosy spot in the duo that was Tommy-and-Carol once again, but he'd still been reluctant to call the three of them friends once more. They sat together at lunch, Tommy and Carol dragged him to the cinema and diner on the weekends, and Carol had even given him her usual gift of cookies for Christmas (this year's word was 'CRETIN'), but Steve didn't know if he could call them friends. All the same, the afternoon of March 15th, Tommy dragged Steve out of school by his shirt sleeve and deposited him into the back seat of Carol's grandparent's car. They rarely took his car these days, a new habit having formed from the trip to Bloomington hospital. Steve liked Carol's grandparent's car, anyway. It smelt like Yardley's Lavender and humbugs, which he always associated with his father's parents, who lived up in Chicago.

Tommy's mom and sister were out for the night. Annie was staying with his grandparents, and his mom had a date with her boyfriend (now going on five months, and Steve was happy for her, really, but Officer Powell? *Really?*), and Tommy didn't expect her home. They'd set up their sleeping bags on the living room floor, as they'd done so long ago. Tommy even swore he'd seen *Thriller* during the midnight slot on MTV, and Steve just rolled his eyes and snapped the gum that Carol had passed him.

They ordered pizza and garlic bread. The birthday cake already had three slices missing in it, a Harwood tradition where cake was eaten for breakfast, but it was big enough that the three teenagers wouldn't lose their chance to devour it. Tommy had also been gifted a six pack, which was cracked open before the beer had even arrived. With the sleeping bags rolled out, MTV on in the background and the smell of pizza permeating the room, this felt so damn familiar that Steve could have sworn that the past couple of years hadn't passed.

Simple Minds was playing on the TV. Steve hummed along, a song that always reminded him of the three of them, sipping his beer. The pizza box had been set on the coffee table that had been pushed to the wall. He eyed it, considering grabbing another slice, when he felt

Tommy kick his ankle.

'Was she worth it?'

'Huh?'

'Nancy. Was she worth it?'

Steve eyeballed him and set the beer down. 'Was it worth telling Mr Donaghue to get fucked and wind up with a week's detention?'

The corner of Tommy's mouth twitched and he rolled his eyes skyward. Steve didn't like speaking about Nancy. Maybe it was misplaced loyalty, maybe it was because he respected dirty laundry not being aired, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Besides, looking back over their relationship always made his gut twist unpleasantly, and he didn't want to sour the mood. Finishing the rest of the can, he squeezed it in half and set it aside behind him. It was his second, and he wondered if maybe he'd downed them both too fast. Things were beginning to feel a little soft at the edge.

'C'mon, Steve, don't be glum,' Carol chided.

She leant forward and grabbed his hands. With a cry, fully intending to tell her he wasn't glum, he gave a yelp. His weight shifted onto his knees as he was dragged forward, and he kicked out a foot to brace himself. It was too late, however, and he wound up careening sideways into Tommy, sending him backwards onto the ground. Tommy laughed, nearly dropping his beer and smacked Steve's thigh.

'Okay, okay, if you wanted to sit on my lap, you could've just asked.'

'Oh, fuck off.'

'Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you?'

'Boys,' Carol said, her tone warning them both to cool it.

She was finishing off her last slice of pizza, and set her plate on the couch. Licking her fingers, she smacked Steve's ass with her other hand. It caused him to jerk up from where he was draped over Tommy's stomach. With a huff, he pressed a hand to the carpet and

pushed up, swinging a leg over him.

Perching himself on Tommy's hips, his hands pressed flat to his stomach. The room was teetering about, and for a moment he thought he'd gone and broken his nose again or smacked the back of his head. Furrowing his brow, he looked down at Tommy's crimson shirt and decided that no, it was just the beer. He liked beer. Beer made things simple and easy. He liked red wine better, though, and he wished he had some of that and then they could listen to the UB40 version of the song. Tommy's shirt looked like red wine. He'd always liked that song.

'Do you remember when you insisted on taking me out for Valentine's as an early birthday present?'

Tommy took hold of Steve's wrists. At some point he'd pushed Tommy's shirt up, and he eyed his stomach, pale and scattered with freckles. Steve liked freckles. Sammy Grey had had freckles, a strange scattering over one cheek and across his shoulders. Tommy had so many, and it seemed greedy, like he was keeping them all for himself. Carol had them, too, but she hid them under make up, and it was only during quiet moments like this when she took the powder off that she let them free.

'Yeah?' Tommy replied.

Carol had stretched out beside him. She'd always been short, her hair adding several inches of height, and her feet ended somewhere around Tommy's knees. Her finger drifted over Tommy's stomach, and he twitched, letting go of one of Steve's wrists to bat her hand away. Settling back on Tommy's thighs, Steve rubbed his face. Dustin had told him not to rub his face. It felt like years ago now, and not only a mere four months ago.

'It was... nice. You guys are nice. I missed you guys. I miss... I missed it.'

'We missed you, too,' Carol said with a laugh, jabbing her finger into his thigh.

'No. No. I mean, I, I *missed* you. It's just... it's just so unfair, y'know?

You took me to the movies for your Valenbirth, and, and *Nancy*- '

'Oh, shit, here it comes,' drawled Tommy, which caused Steve to shush him, a hand over his mouth.

'No. *Shhh*ut up, I'm- ' Shutting his eyes tight, he tried to focus. He was trying to say something, but he couldn't remember what.

He was sitting on Tommy's thighs. They were warm, strong. Even after switching to basketball, he still retained the strength and speed of a lacrosse player. Steve had always liked his legs. He liked Carol's legs, too. All her height was in her legs. And her hips, he liked her hips. And Tommy's shoulders. And both of their hands, he liked both of their hands, especially when they would hold him still and fuss over him however they wanted.

'She only blew me, like, once.'

'No!'

'Didn't even want me to go down on her. She said she- said it made her feel uncomfortable. So... so.'

Kissing Selena at the middle school Snowball when she hadn't wanted to be kissed had taught Steve to keep his hands and mouth to himself. Some lessons always stuck with him.

Steve stared at Tommy's red shirt. He really did like the colour. Pressing his hand to the centre of Tommy's chest, watching his fingers splay over it, he kept his head bowed. There was a point he was leading to, but he suddenly found himself unable to find the words. There were things he wanted to do. Things that Nancy had never particularly enjoyed (and that was her right, her prerogative, but damn if it hadn't frustrated him), things that he wanted to do but had never had the opportunity to. Humming to himself, he felt a hand running through his hair, soft enough to get him to lift his head. Then a mouth on his, vanilla chapstick and beer, the hand on the back of his head keeping him close as Carol kissed him. Her other hand rested atop one of his own, and guided his hand down, over Tommy's shirt and stomach to the waist of his jeans and over his fly.

In all the times they had blurred the line between friendship and something else, Steve had never actually touched Tommy, nor had Tommy offered anything in return. Sure, Steve had slipped his hand down the front of Carol's jeans, and she'd gotten him off as Steve had made out with Tommy, but there had been a barrier that Steve had never quite dared to cross. Even rutting against his leg had always felt a little too close to something unnamed and dangerous. But now his hand was there, and he could feel Tommy, actually *feel* him, and damn if that wasn't hot. There was something extraordinarily powerful feeling Tommy get hard under his hand, and Steve looked up at his face just in time to see Tommy shut his eyes and tip his head back.

'It's a pity... I do enjoy...' he started, thinking mostly aloud to himself as his thumb ran over the metal zip.

Steve had never gone down on a guy (*clearly*), but he did like using it. Kissing was one of his favourite things, and his heart still skipped a beat when someone leant in close. He was forever putting things in his mouth that didn't belong there. Pens, pencils, straws, his own fingers and whatever body parts his partner would let him suck on. If he'd happened to develop a small reputation amongst certain girls at school, then that was par for the course.

At some point Carol had pushed herself up and had curled up around Tommy, her head on his shoulder. Tommy hadn't moved, and neither of them had said anything, but Steve still felt a little nervous. Curling his fingers, he took a deep breath and dared to raise his eyes.

'Can I?'

There was a tense moment, and Steve briefly wondered if it were at all possible the bump to the back of his head had caused some sort of delayed effect, whereby he completely misread situations. But then he heard Tommy breathe a very quiet 'okay', and Carol's eyes had grown wide with interest, the same way they did whenever she saw something she liked.

It seemed wrong to do this clothed. With a breath, he sat up straight and pulled his shirt up and over his head. Tossing it aside, he held their gaze for a breath. The quiet stretched out, Steve's chest heaving

in the warm, yellow light that filled the living room. One of them swore- Steve couldn't say who. And then there were hands on him, grabbing and fast, and Steve found Tommy was sitting up, his red wine shirt being pulled over his head by Carol. Tommy's bare chest crushed against Steve's, and he felt him, hard and pressing and *hot*, Steve was astounded by the very heat that was radiating through Tommy's jeans. Gasping, he lurched back, only to find Carol there, her own shirt off, a bra strap hanging from her shoulder.

Steve tried to help Carol with her bra, but the number of clasps confounded him. Even with both hands, he couldn't quite figure out how it went, particularly while Tommy was pulling at his jeans, and shit Tommy was pulling at his jeans and Carol was undoing her own bra, and of course thought was well beyond him just then. Certain things could definitely be blamed on head injuries, even four months old.

Jeans next. Steve found himself being toppled backwards, skidding slightly on the sleeping bag as he was pushed on his back. He squawked, which turned into fits of laughter as Tommy and Carol, with a leg of his jeans each, pulled them clean down. His briefs, caught on his jeans, were dragged down in the haul. Lifting his hips, it wasn't until his jeans were flung over Carol's shoulder that he realised he was naked. His erection, resting against his thigh, didn't immediately register until he saw Tommy's eyes drop to it. Swallowing hard, Steve froze, waiting.

'See, I told you he swung to the right,' Tommy finally remarked to Carol.

'Oh, fuck off,' Steve drawled.

Leaning up, he grabbed Tommy and pulled at his jeans, Carol cackling the whole while. Although getting undressed was intimidating, Steve found nudity to be a great equaliser in some ways. There were no masks to hide behind, no armour to fall back on. Just the three of them and their skin, the scars and birthmarks and freckles that danced over their skin. Carol's body was riddled with stretch marks from when puberty had hit her hard. Tommy had a scar from an appendectomy that had become infected post-surgery. Steve's body was covered in constellations of moles. Their hands took

their time to run over one another, learning the dips and curves that perhaps they had once known in years gone by and childhood had kept them shielded from self-consciousness.

There was a shift, and the room teetered on an angle, and Steve found himself pinning Tommy to the floor. He sat between his thighs, his skin beginning to prickle as he looked down at him. Carol was pressed up behind him, her breasts against his back. Her hands splayed over his chest, fingertips combing through the hair that Nancy had once had him shave and he'd complied in a desperate attempt to appease her. Carol's mouth moved over his neck, the shell of his ear, pushing his hair up and off the back of his neck to nip at the birthmark that lived at the very edge of his hairline.

Later on, Steve couldn't say what compelled him to do it. Only that he could, and Tommy wasn't stopping him, and Carol was rubbing against his calf, wet and aroused, and Steve was, too, and so was Tommy. But he found himself shifting down, bending at the waist, taking Tommy's cock in his mouth, and it hit him as he did that there was no turning back from this, that he couldn't wipe this experience off, and that *yeah*, he actually *really* liked guys as much as he did girls. His lips wrapped around the head of Tommy's cock, his brows furrowing together as though he were deep in thought, and he couldn't really pretend it was anything else but a cock. The skin was soft, but also sort of hard, and there was a salty, briny taste to it that really wasn't like pussy.

Tommy made a noise, a gasp, and slurred something that sounded an awful lot like, '*holy shit, this is really gay*'. The absurdity of remark caused Steve to jerk his head up and snort, which turned into a laugh, and soon he was doubled over, shoulders shaking as Carol hugged him from behind and laughed as well. Her fingernails dug into his chest and Tommy threw his hands over his eyes as Steve rested his forehead against Tommy's pelvis and snickered because *yeah*, this really was. The laughter was encouraging, though, and Steve turned his head, just enough to slick his tongue from root to tip, which caused Tommy to moan and jerk up.

As Steve began to find his way around Tommy's length, Carol's hands roamed over his face and jaw, guiding him, directing him. A hand smoothed back his hair- Steve couldn't tell whose- and pressed him

down. He couldn't take much, the constant thought circling his mind that he was sucking Tommy's cock, but Tommy moaned and swore, and that was enough to keep him going. Spit collected in the corners of his mouth, and his jaw began to burn. One of Carol's hands slipped down and gripped him, stroking him from behind. Each upwards stroke nudged him towards Tommy, his mouth dipping down further. He never went very far, his hand wrapping around the base of Tommy's cock. As he lifted his head, his hand moved with him, then back down until his lips pressed to his finger. There was a rhythm that he found eventually, twisting his wrist as he realised Tommy quite liked that, his tongue pressing against the slit. All he had to go by was how he enjoyed his own cock being sucked, and it had been a long time since that had happened, but he found Tommy was more than a little encouraging, hissing what he liked and urging Steve to go on.

Looking back, Steve was sure Tommy tried to give some warning. A tap to his head, a groaning slur of Steve's name. He could even taste it; the saltiness growing slightly bitter, a twitch and a pulse. He definitely heard the hitch in Tommy's breath, the way he gave a yelp when Steve sucked at the tip. But Carol was sucking on the back of his neck, her hand working him in a way that he recalled her doing a few years earlier, as though she hadn't forgotten how he liked the head played with, her thumb to the slit much as his tongue was presently doing to Tommy. His mouth filled with a thick, wet heat, and Steve jerked up with a hacking cough, spitting and gagging. Lifting his head in shock, swallowing reflexively, he was greeted with a horrified expression from Tommy, who immediately began to laugh. Steve smacked his thigh, nearly knocking Carol back.

'A little warning, asshole!' He could taste it as he spoke. Bitter and salty, his tongue running over his lips habitually, only to feel it smear everywhere.

'I tried, I tried- oh, God, your *face*- '

Steve gave him another smack, which lost some of its force given he was naked and hard, and he was fairly sure come was still streaking his jaw. Swiping at it, feeling heat burn his cheeks, he tried to suppress his own laugh. Really, he had every right to be indignant. Taking the shirt Carol offered him (Tommy's, he noted smugly), he

wiped his mouth on it and tossed it aside. The moment it was gone, Carol had her arms around him and was guiding him onto her, an insistent hand pushing him down.

'My turn.'

This was something he didn't need to think about. It had been a while, granted, but Steve had always enjoyed going down on a girl. The musky scent, so different to that of a guy's own arousal. With his still-broken nose, the taste was far more subtle, but Carol was soft and wet, and her fingernails dug into his hair as his fingers slipped inside. She'd shaved since the last time the three of them had been together, he noted dully; the dark red hair was shorter than he recalled. His tongue lapped deeply, his thumb pressing against her clit until she gasped and her hips jerked up. This was easier, this was familiar and welcome. He knew she'd been on the pill since she and Tommy had started screwing, having passed him the box they came in with a certain level of pride.

A pair of hands settled on his hips. Shifting his weight onto an elbow, Steve grunted as he was guided back, his ass in the air as Tommy grabbed his erection from behind. His hand was bigger, coarser than Carol's. The rhythm was faster, more perfunctory. Tommy didn't have the same experience with Steve's cock that Carol did (however limited that may be), but he knew where to grip, how to twist his wrist, his thumb slipping over the crown and pressing firmly on the underside. Steve gave a choking, warbling yelp from where he had his mouth pressed against Carol. Lifting his head to take a breath, brow to her pelvis. Tommy's other hand grabbed his hip tightly, and as he canted back, he felt his cock, soft and wet but still fat with arousal between his cheeks. It felt deliciously wrong and his spine rippled with pleasure, toes curling into carpet.

'I think he likes that.'

Steve nodded at Carol's remark. Her hands combed through his hair, pushing it off his face. A finger stroked down his cheekbone to his lips, wet with her arousal, the taste of Tommy still on his tongue. Slipping a finger past his lips, he sucked on it, his own digits twisting within her. Everything felt punctuated by Tommy's hand wrapped around him, his mouth leaving a trail of kisses up his spine.

'His neck- he likes his neck kissed.'

'Also clearly likes being in the middle,' Tommy chuckled, working his way back up at Carol's direction.

'C'mon, Stevie, I wanna see.'

Although Steve felt he should be embarrassed, he couldn't bring himself to care. He felt Carol tighten around his fingers, the sensation distant given his own mind was a blur, his world narrowing down until the heat deep in his belly swelled and a pounding echoed in his mind and he was coming with a shout, his body shivering as his cock was stroked from root to tip. Pulling his fingers free from Carol, he grabbed her hip, squeezing as he rocked back into Tommy until his lungs burned for oxygen. Sucking in a breath, he sank down, face to inner thigh and gave a final shiver. His teeth bit down as his palm pressed against her, feeling her pulse against him as her pale skin bruised under his mouth.

The room was quiet, bar the collective panting. There was a sniff from Tommy, a hiccup from Carol. Steve felt dizzy. He groped at the floor, dragging himself over Carol, and flopped beside her. Tommy had moved to drape himself over the bottom of the couch, his head resting against the cushions. Tossing an arm over his eyes, Steve stretched out, trying to ground himself.

'You fucking suck at celebrating your birthday, Tommy.' Steve's voice sounded rough, even to his own ears.

'Why's that?'

'You keep doing nice things for me.'

Tommy snorted. Then, after a moment, 'I dunno. I got something, too. Better than a suck job.'

Daring to crack open an eye, Steve peered over at him. Carol had already rolled over onto her stomach, her hands folded under her chin as she rubbed her feet together. She tended to do that after sex, as though she couldn't quite control herself.

'Yeah?'

'Your face. Right when I came in your mouth. Oh, fuck, that was *priceless*- '

With a yell, Steve grabbed one of the pillows from behind him and threw it at Tommy. His arms were tossed up just in time to protect himself from it, and with a laugh he threw it back. Carol had leapt up already, her own pillow at the ready and threw herself at Tommy at Steve's expense. This was what Steve had missed, most of all. These mindless, crazed moments, where they could kick and jibe at one another without any concern of it coming back to bite them. Steve had missed this when he'd needed it the most.

*

Tommy wasn't gay. He didn't have any particular interest in men. Steve knew that, and Tommy had blathered as such the first time he'd gotten hard and spent several minutes grinding between Steve's legs as they made out, the denim of their jeans getting hot and tight. He definitely wasn't like Steve, who both would catch him glancing over his shoulder whenever a guy caught his eye and Tommy would elbow him to be a little more subtle about it.

'It's just you,' he said as way of explanation, several months after the first time the three of them had made out. 'You're the exception.'

All of it suited Steve just fine, anyway. It wasn't like the three of them were dating. Tommy and Carol were still Tommy-and-Carol, and Steve still found himself flirting with girls during their sophomore year. He went on a few dates here and there, and dated Amy for a month or so before she made a jab about one of their Hispanic classmates. Steve couldn't say what it was that bothered him, but he ended things and went along his way.

He liked the arrangement he, Tommy and Carol had. He liked being shared by both of them, and he liked the freedom and security he could have in equal amounts. They didn't always fall into bed together whenever they slept over, and Steve really wasn't interested in their sex life if it didn't include him. There was a quiet agreement between the three of them whenever things became heated and one of them had to leave the room (like when Carol's grandmother came home), things were put on pause until that person returned. Nothing

seemed off-limits, either, when the three of them were together. The only thing that slowed things down were their own shyness and still-being-explored sexualities.

Mostly he couldn't see himself dating either one of them on an individual basis. The pair balanced each other out. Tommy had a tendency to withdraw, particularly when Annie had another one of her spells, and Carol was far too free-spirited. Carol burned bright and hot, throwing herself head first into whatever excited her, while Tommy moved slower, sometimes at a molasses-like pace. Steve liked to sit himself between them, feel their energies flow through him.

Carol was more than happy with the arrangement. She would drape herself over the two of them, her head resting on Tommy's lap and her ankles crossed with her feet in Steve's, and she'd snap her gum and wink if somebody did a double take.

'I have two boys who adore me and lavish me with attention, why shouldn't I benefit from this deal?' she'd say, poking each of them in the chest.

Despite her argument, Steve felt he was the one who was adored and lavished in equal measure. They had bent and broken the rules of their relationship to let Steve in, and he drank in all they had to give. It was funny how quickly that feeling returned after his two-year absence, as though they had been waiting all that while to make him the centre of attention all over again.

*

Carol's acceptance letter to college came in April. She came racing into school on a Thursday, screeching in delight. Steve watched as she shouldered Nancy out of the way (he wasn't sure if it was deliberate, but he'd bet good money it likely was) and was promptly shoved into his locker. Tommy, who was standing beside him and chatting about whether he wanted to see the new Stephen King film, scooped Carol into his arms and grabbed the letter out of her hand.

'Dear Miss Duckett, we regret to inform you that you are a massive loser and should be- wait, you got into *Findlay*?'

'What, seriously?'

Snatching the letter from Tommy, Steve scanned the letter. Animal Science, with a minor in Equine Science. Gaping, Steve let out a holler and high-fived her. She was beaming, her face flushed with excitement. It was a wonder she'd been able to wait all night, and Steve remarked as such.

'Mom insisted I tell you two in person. She was going to make me wait until tomorrow, invite you two around, but Meemaw said I'd die if I waited that long. But you two still need to come over tomorrow, Pop is making his brandy custard.'

Tommy wrapped his arms around Carol and pulled her in close. Unable to help himself, Steve watched them kiss, feeling a surge of jealousy that he couldn't quite join in. Relegated to waiting for a hug, he tossed his arms around her when given the opportunity. He pressed the acceptance letter between her shoulder blades, congratulating her again in a low voice. It seemed woefully unfair that he couldn't bestow her with the same affection in public that Tommy could, when the three of them had broken down the boundaries of their friendship, changed them, moulded them, until the three of them fit together.

When their friendship had blossomed again, Steve had been surprised by the amount of gossip that had spread. Steve had always made an effort to be on good terms with people. His father called it good business acumen, a phrase that Steve never quite knew how to accept, seeing as he just wanted people to get along. Popularity had come as a surprise to Steve, seeing as he'd been a bit of a dorky kid, with a mouthful of metal and a shock of hair that he never quite knew how to style. Having his public life be something that was up for gossip and discussion sat uneasily within him. People liked to flutter in and out of his social circle, trying to grasp some of that popularity as though it were up for consumption.

It was part of the reason why he loved Tommy and Carol so much (and it was love, he realised dimly. Maybe not the burning, passionate love of romance, but it was deep bodied and existed in his bones, making up the very framework of his existence). They never sought out the popularity like others did. They didn't care for his

money, or his father's name, or for the doors that opened when he was with them. They loved him and all the other things that came with him. His grotesque love of New Wave music, his penchant for chewing on straws and pens and toothpicks until they broke or became gummy. They loved his terrible jokes, and his tendency to coat his fries in mayo. They didn't love his poor choice in girls, but they tried their best to support him nonetheless. And he loved them for it.

Tommy and Steve went over for dinner the following evening. Another thing he always loved was dinners at Carol's place. It felt like a real family affair, with the table set neatly and her grandmother's doilies used in place of coasters. The Wheelers had often bickered over dinner, and Steve had had to choke down his dinner. His own family rarely ate together, and when they did, it was often in silence. Tommy's family, on the other hand, would eat in front of the TV. That had always been a bit of a novelty to Steve, and he'd liked the funny little trays that rested upon their laps.

Steve sat next to Carol's mother at the table, opposite Tommy and Carol. Although they typically tried to squish in one side of the table, this was a more formal dinner than usual. Besides, he liked Carol's mom.

Sparkling grape juice was served (unlike Tommy's mom, Carol's family was less likely to serve alcohol to the three of them), and Steve was delighted by the shepherd's pie. Carol's grandmother had emigrated to the US in the fifties from England, and Steve loved the funny eccentricities as a result. The pie, the sweets, the strange phrasings she would use, like how she announced to Steve, 'cor, blimey, you're looking like one of those beatniks!' when she saw his hair. At least, that's what Steve thought she said. It was something delightfully British all the same.

The first half of the meal was spent gushing and congratulating Carol. Her cheeks went pink with embarrassment, her grin spread wide over her face. She'd always lavished attention, and it was a rarity to have the opportunity to indulge in her academic achievements being recognised. Like Steve, she acted up in class to hide her intelligence, keeping her report card close to her chest to hide the As and Bs in case someone saw and word got out that Carol Duckett was a secret

nerd.

As the plates were scraped clean and her grandfather went to get the custard, the questions inevitably turned to the other two boys. Questions about their future plans were raised, and Steve relished as he watched Tommy squirm.

'I was thinking of taking a year off. Work, figure out what I want to do,' he said, avoiding the elder Duckett's eye. 'Maybe work on my art a little. I dunno. Annie's been doing well recently, and Findlay's not too far away compared to other out of state colleges, so I could always come back if she takes a spell.'

And, like that, it was abundantly clear that Tommy wasn't planning on sticking around in Hawkins after graduation. There had been some light discussion about it, when Steve would listen to Tommy and Carol discussing housing options if Carol got into her college of choice. But that had been *then*, months prior, when she was still filling out her applications and talking about essays. Steve had been recovering from the fight, and he hadn't paid it much attention. There was little point in worrying about college when he could barely hold his focus for five minutes.

But this was now. And those little chats came flying back. Student housing on and off campus, the cost of an apartment, how far student loans would go. Her courses of choice would be full-on, but Tommy had no real aspirations in terms of further education. He enjoyed art, but had no real drive to follow it through as a career. He wanted to take some time off from school, work, and reassess in twelve months. Somehow Steve hadn't taken these conversations in, even when he'd nodded along and agreed that community college might be the way to go, lest he face a future of working in an office with his father, with a collared shirt and tie and a deep, centre part.

'Alice,' Steve suddenly said, just as the custard was brought out. 'Could I talk to you about community colleges later?'

It wasn't much. The idea had been tossed around a number of times, and Steve wasn't entirely sure if he could still apply for a community college this close to the end of the school year. But it was a start, and surely that counted for something. And Carol's mother brightened,

dabbed her mouth with a napkin, and nodded. He could feel Tommy and Carol's eyes on him, and he avoided their faces as he reached for his glass and finished it off.

*

Tommy had always been interested in art – specifically painting. Like Carol, who acted out to hide her good grades, and Steve who hid his love of math and confused people when he did AP Calculus, Tommy kept his love of painting a secret. Although he took art as a subject at school, he joked that it was simply a soft class and he didn't need to try that hard. Only Steve and Carol and those he took art with knew how much effort he put into it. He'd cart around his canvases, carefully wrapped in brown paper, spending time after school and lunch breaks in the art room, where paint thinner and the smell of clay would fill the room.

If Carol's go-to gift were lovingly baked cookies with hidden messages, then Tommy's were strange little art projects. One Christmas, Steve was gifted a series of coasters, each with a hand painted fruit, done in a series of tiny dots. The amount of time it would have taken to do each one was clear, and Steve took his time setting them up in a frame and placing it carefully on top of his cupboard. Years later, when he saw Ferris Bueller at the cinema with the pair, he recognised the art style in the museum scene.

It was an escape from Annie's repeated illnesses. For the most part, Tommy played cool, shrugging a shoulder and saying that his little sister got sick often and he was used to it. It didn't take much for Carol and Steve to see beyond that, though. They saw the stress behind his smile, the dark circles under his eyes from nights when she'd been up coughing. If neither Carol nor Steve could find Tommy during the day, he'd be inevitably found in the art room, adding what he always promised were the 'finishing touches' to his latest piece.

Steve didn't understand art. Tommy described his style as a mix of expressionism and fauvism, and Steve would just nod and pretend he knew what those words meant. Even though he didn't get art, he did like seeing it. He liked the way the paint would fleck over Tommy's hands and arms, creating yellow and purple and green freckles. When Carol was at the ranch on weekends, Steve would laze on the couch

in the room where he, Tommy and Carol always seemed to find themselves, and do his homework while Tommy lay down newspapers and began to paint.

Even if it was only an outlet for the stress of a sick sister and a single mother, Steve could tell Tommy enjoyed it. He'd proudly show off his latest work as it dried, holding it up by the edges. He was better at art than basketball, and Steve sometimes wondered why he didn't pursue it further. Medicine may be off the cards, both as a doctor and a nurse, but he did have a talent for painting. Tommy didn't see it that way, though.

'I don't even want to go to college, bud,' he admitted. 'I'm just saying that to get people off my back. I'd rather just start working. Send some money back home to Ma and Annie. Do my own thing for a while, y'know?'

It didn't solve Steve's quandary about his life post-high school, but it did give him food for thought. His father was hounding him about work, his teachers wanted to know what schools he'd applied for. Both Tommy and Carol's families asked about his plans. And Steve could only come back with a big fat *nothing*. But Tommy's phrasing, to do his own thing, stuck in Steve's brain, as he watched Tommy send a big, swooping line of yellow across the canvas he was working on. That was something.

*

Graduation was tearing down on them. Steve felt like it should have been more important and that he should feel something. Instead, he was suffering from a terrible head cold that was causing a lot of pain around his sinuses. His broken nose, with its twisted septum, meant he couldn't breathe at the best of times. His stuffy nose left him hunched over a bowl of steaming water with a cloth over his head. Peppermint stung his eyes and the Tylenol did little to reduce his headache or fever. He'd been suffering from nosebleeds multiple times a day for a month, and the cold was only making it worse.

'Guys, I don't think this is working,' he said. Or tried to say, at any rate; his head was filled with marshmallows, cotton filled his mouth, and he was sure he was missing a few vowels and mispronouncing a

whole slew of consonants.

'Your soup is on the stove. It won't be long,' Carol soothed, referring to the Viking death soup Tommy had been making.

'One of you could blow me. That might make me feel better.'

'Keep dreaming. Last thing I want is you snorting in my hair,' Carol drawled, getting up to check on the soup.

'It was one time!' Tommy yelled after her, before swearing and apologising to Steve when he winced and blocked his ears.

With his cold lasting the entire week before his final high school exams, Steve didn't have time to think about much else. He lurched from one exam to the next, the end of his pens and pencils being rendered to a splintered obliteration. At the end of the two weeks, he collapsed in a heap in his bedroom, tissues, Benadryl and peppermint oil spilled around his room. He slept the entirety of the following weekend.

Graduation came. Steve next to Tommy, due to the Harrington/Harwood closeness in alphabetical order. Carol was two rows from the front, forced to sit between two classmates who kept eyeballing her and her low-cut blouse. She would toss her hair over her shoulder and wink, before turning back to wave at Steve and Tommy.

Steve's parents smiled when he received his diploma, wide and honest.

And Carol cheered.

And Tommy threw him the bird.

And Annie, sitting with her mother, threw him a thumbs up.

And Carol's grandmother waved.

And Steve realised with a stunning clarity that Billy wasn't even there, but he didn't linger on that too much, because Tommy's name was being called.

They agreed to meet up that evening. Steve went home with his folks, where, for a brief moment, similar to months earlier, he luxuriated in their attention. His mother ruffled his carefully coiffed hair, his father beamed at his high school diploma. It wasn't much of an achievement, as he'd just done the same thing as two hundred-odd other eighteen-year-olds, but he drank in their affection. His mother sighed, 'oh, Steven,' and his father clapped him on the back and said, 'you did well, son. Look at your math grade!' and Steve just nodded and let himself pretend that more people were proud of him than the two people that definitely didn't give a hoot beyond what they could brag about who were in the room that moment.

Before stopping by Tommy's, as that had become their rendezvous of choice, Steve swung by the bakery downtown. Purchasing a half dozen croissants, his pastry *de rigueur*, he turned to find Nancy just outside the window. She had spotted him, a braid over her shoulder and her hands clutched around the strap of a bag. Steve briefly wondered if he could flee out the back exit, before turning his chin up and heading out the entrance. He was a high school graduate now. He could deal with an ex-girlfriend.

'Congratulations,' she said quietly when he stopped in front of her. 'For today.'

'Yeah, well...' Steve didn't have a retort. 'It'll be you next year.'

Nancy's lips pursed together. He recognised that look. It was the one she gave when she was debating asking a question; she'd have to spill it out eventually. She'd never been very good at holding back, particularly when it was something she felt she had to say. Steve almost admired her in a way, for being able to hold onto her lie about being in love with him for the better part of a year.

'What now? You sticking around?'

Steve screwed his nose up. Well, he tried to. He didn't have much movement in his cheeks still, and his nose felt more like a prosthetic than something actually attached to his face.

'Nah. I've got plans.'

He didn't. But he knew he wasn't sticking around. At some point in time, it had been decided that Steve would be accompanying Tommy and Carol to Ohio. It wasn't the glorious escape from Hawkins that he'd always envisioned, but it was away from Hawkins. Carol would talk about classes, and Tommy would talk about work, and somehow Steve would get pulled into this strange set up. Carol's mother had found a list of community colleges both in and around Findlay, and although it was a little late to enrol now, Steve knew he could work for six months and save up for tuition.

So maybe he did have plans. Somehow, they'd begun to etch themselves into the sand.

He turned to leave when Nancy's voice stopped him.

'I'm surprised that you and they... Tommy and Carol,' she clarified, in that breathy way people did, so it came out as Tommy-and-Carol. 'I thought you hated them.'

Steve stopped and studied her. 'Why?'

'You stopped talking to them,' she said, as though it were abundantly clear. She shrugged her shoulders and tossed a hand into the air, the way she always did when her point wasn't being understood.

'I stopped talking to them because of *you*. I chose you over them.'

'I didn't make you do that.'

At that, Steve paused. It had never been explicitly asked by her. But it didn't take much effort for him to cast his mind back, and recall the tightly-pursed lips, the way she'd narrow her eyes at each of them. Her upper lip would twitch whenever they would make jokes about their sex life, and she'd flinch if they ever tried to bring her into a joke. Carol's hurt expression about hearing Nancy call her a slut would fill Steve's mind, as did the insinuation that Annie had a different father to Tommy. Nancy may have never asked Steve to stop hanging out with his friends, but she'd never needed to.

'Yeah,' he finally stated. 'You did. See you round.'

It wasn't clever or quick, but he didn't want to waste his time

thinking of a slick comeback. Tossing the bag of cruellers into his other hand, he grabbed his keys out of his back pocket and hurried to his car. Refusing to let Nancy get to him, he pulled his sunglasses on and drove off. By the time he arrived at Tommy's, he actually felt *good*. Proud, even, a strange emotion that he hadn't quite felt for a long time. Although he hadn't exactly stood up to Nancy, or truly confronted her, it had been the most words he'd said to her about- about *anything*. He wished he could have asked her more- when she had stopped loving him, if she ever had loved him. Why she hadn't visited after the fight, was she still with Jonathan, did she miss him in any way. But he tossed those thoughts from his head, refusing to dwell any further when he made his way up the Harwood driveway.

When he arrived, Steve asked where Tommy's mother and sister were, as he always did. Another date for his mother and Annie had been well enough to go to a sleepover. Tommy lunged for a crueller before Carol, who had arrived shortly before Steve, smacked the back of his hand and told him to wait for after dinner.

Steve brought up seeing Nancy. He mentioned what he said, how she had looked. He rarely embellished, preferring to stick to the facts. Tommy and Carol knew he was an act-first, think-later sort of guy, and his tactic in an argument was to avoid it as much as possible. Emotions always came last, but they hit the heaviest. Sitting at the breakfast bar, ripping apart a crueller but not eating it, he felt their eyes on him.

The air was different tonight. There was something unsaid. An acknowledgement of their past, together and apart. An unsaid promise for their future, combined. Confronting Nancy, no matter how minor, had been the first step to closing a door. Not just on her, but on Billy, on his parents, on Hawkins. His nose was bent internally, it still hurt to touch, and sometimes if he sneezed he felt like he was going to rupture an artery.

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'No,' he said, shaking his head at Tommy. It wasn't no because he didn't want to, but no because he didn't know how to. 'But one day.'

They didn't pressure him. There was nothing said about how he could

always talk to them, how they'd always be there to listen, because Steve already knew that. He didn't need their reassurance, their kind words, because they were already there. They had come back for him. They'd dragged them along for the rest of their senior year, until he had found himself sandwiched between them again, much as he was now, with Tommy to his left and Carol to his right, pulling the pastry from his hands and hauling him from his seat.

After a soft word of encouragement from Tommy, Steve allowed himself to get tugged along. Carol pushed him along from behind, nudging him through the hallway and down to Tommy's bedroom. The robe from the ceremony had been tossed over his bed, the cap having already been discarded and fallen to the floor. Tommy stopped when they reached the centre of the room. Arms slid around him from both sides, sandwiching him in close.

He knew this dance now. It was familiar, soothing, a balm to the wounds that life had lashed him with. There was so much he couldn't say to Tommy or Carol, about the lab, about the upside down, about the beasts that still terrorised him in his sleep. There were other things that he didn't want to say, not until he'd sorted out his own thoughts. About Nancy, about Billy, about Max. Actions had always been easier than words, though, and he knew how to turn his head and find mouths to kiss and hips to hold, clothes to pull off and bodies to clutch at when they were bare and pressed against him.

The bed rushed up to meet them. The gown was caught underneath them, splayed out like a sea of black. Steve allowed himself to get shoved up the bed by Tommy, feeling his mouth along his shoulders and neck, while Carol tossed the gown onto the floor and situated herself on his lap. Letting his eyes shut, Steve drank in every touch, feeling their hands run over his stomach and waist, over his bare thighs and ribs. Even with his eyes shut, who knew who was touching him and where, whose mouth was on his, whose lips ran down his arms. Allowing them to push him so he lay down on the bed, he felt them slide alongside, both of them partially draped over him. He listened to them whisper his name, a series of kisses trailing from his neck to his chest and nipples.

It was Tommy who took hold of his cock, already hard and hot. The sensation of the slightly callused, broader hand over his length made

Steve's eyes open wide; it was unexpected and new, and he hiccuped with surprise. Carol was still kissing his throat, her hand sliding along his inner thigh, keeping his legs apart. Breathing in shakily, Steve tried to hold back the inevitable shiver that ran from the top of his head, down his back and to his feet. His hips arched off the bed as he gasped, only to find Tommy kissing him.

'We want to try something,' Carol whispered in his ear, pressing a kiss to his temple. 'Hold tight.'

Steve gave a soft nod, biting his lower lip. It always made his heart skip a beat when he heard one of them say *we*. It implied they'd been talking about him, about them, about the three of them *together*. Planning and discussing and plotting it out. It drew him back to the two of them arriving at his home in November, after he'd missed school. Or further back, to Valentine's Day years ago, when they'd dragged him to the cinema. And then there was the future, when at some point they had decided that Steve would be accompanying them out of Hawkins and into a grand adventure that wasn't punctuated by monsters, both of another world and those of this terrifying mortal plane.

There was a slight rock of the mattress as Carol got up. Steve wasn't able to watch as Tommy was kissing him again, his hand still running over his cock. Every upwards stroke was met by Steve rocking his hips up to meet him part way. Tommy's other hand came up to cup his cheek, keeping his face turned towards him. Steve didn't have a chance to watch as Carol returned, even as a cold, slick hand ran over his balls.

'Oh, *shhhit*- '

'Easy now,' Carol said with a laugh.

'Shit, that's *cold*- '

'Tommy likes it cold.'

'Well, I don't!' Steve tried to argue, even with a soft chuckle and a breathy moan. With two hands working over him, he really couldn't fight it.

'You're such a whiner, Jesus,' Tommy chided.

Somehow Steve was able to will up the strength to smack Tommy's shoulder. Pink-cheeked and lips slightly kiss-swollen, he threw a petulant look in his direction. It soon faded, though, as the lube warmed and Carol's hand dropped lower. Sucking in a loud breath, his head turned as her slim fingers reached back further, and he knew, somewhere in the back of his mind, where they were going, but he found himself unable to stop her.

'You can't- that's not- '

It felt good, though. It felt good. The first touch of her fingertips against his hole made Steve cry out, jerk back instinctively, because her fingers couldn't go *there*. Jaw twitching, he managed to fight back the urge to pull her hand away. The rarely-touched nerve endings sprang to life, combined with the hand around his cock. Dragging his hands up, he pressed the heels of his hands to his brow and tipped his head back, letting his legs part a little further.

'Really, after all the times you've fingered *me*- '

'That's *so* not funny, Carol,' Steve slurred.

'It's a little funny.'

'Shuddup, Tom- *fuck*- '

Carol had slipped a finger in. That was definitely something she shouldn't be doing. Hips jerking up, he groped around behind himself, finding the wall. Slamming his hand against it, his cheeks turning a deep crimson, his mouth opened wide in a silent moan. It was weird and foreign, and part of his body was saying no while another part was going more. Unable to articulate what he was feeling, Steve grit his teeth and bore down, breathing through a clenched jaw as he felt Carol's finger slip further inside of him.

It didn't hurt. Not really. It did, however, feel quite odd. The lube still somehow felt cool, and Steve felt Tommy's fingers drop low to run over his balls, until his palm was slick and he could drag it back up. Carol was planting kisses along his hip and the dip of his pelvis,

while Tommy had found a spot on the crook of his neck to suck, and Steve couldn't *breathe*, it was far too much. Pressing his bicep into his face, he arched up a little further, just as Carol slipped her finger out. Before he could register what was happening, he felt a blunt pressure again.

'C'mon, Stevie boy. *Breathe*.'

'Easy for you to say,' Steve rasped to Tommy. 'You're not the one being fingered here.'

The pair laughed. Unable to find space in his brain for confusion, Steve merely watched as Carol lay down beside him, her fingers still deep inside of him. She hooked a leg over his, keeping him pinned as she moved her fingers slowly.

'I had to practice on someone.'

'What? Oh- *oh*- '

Steve couldn't adequately say what Carol had done. The whole sensation of fingers inside of him (because there had to be more than one) had been rather peculiar, but now there was something else, something beyond the tight stretch and the rather foreign feeling of something moving inside of him, but a sudden heat spreading from deep within and radiating out. Unable to think, unable to do so much as breathe, Steve's fingers curled into the wall and the pillow beneath his head. He felt Carol kissing him, and he knew he was responding, but it was more of a distant realisation.

'More- '

There was a click, which he knew to be the cap from the bottle of lube being flicked off. Carol's fingers were cold again as they slid inside, but Steve suddenly felt hot, fucking *hot*, all over, like he'd been dunked in a steaming bath. Swallowing hard, he gasped and turned his head, groping blindly for Tommy. Steve wanted, whatever was on offer. When Tommy nudged him onto his side, he went willingly. As Carol wrapped her arms around him, he didn't even care, only that her fingers were gone and he suddenly felt empty. The thought soon left his addled mind, though, as her legs wrapped

around him, her hand taking hold of his length and guiding him until he sank inside. She felt as hot as he did, slick and wet, and Steve swore low as it occurred to him that he was in her, and Tommy was behind him, and shit, shit, this felt like something he should have asked, but words were failing him, and besides, Carol was kissing him and digging her nails into his back, and he liked that, he actually liked that, and they both knew Steve couldn't resist nails digging into or scratching his back.

A pair of firm hands suddenly gripped him from behind. For a brief moment, Steve thought Tommy was going to pull him off, and he was ready to apologise, when Carol's heels dug into the small of his back. Holding his breath, Steve stilled, Tommy's hands preventing him from moving. There was a swipe of something against his hole, a thumb perhaps, and Steve gave another shivering moan, his face pressing into the crook of Carol's neck.

'Hold still.'

Tommy's voice sound thick, rough. Steve recognised it now, the croakiness from when he'd sucked him off the first time, when Carol rode him, when he'd gotten hard the first time and Steve had accidentally pressed against him. Steve could also feel him. The slide of his own cock between Steve's cheeks, hard and slick with lube, and *fuck*, that was hot. With a tremble, Steve grazed his teeth against Carol's neck, unable to help but rock back, only to find Tommy pressing him forward with his hands, deep into Carol. Gasping, he felt Carol arch up to meet him.

'Jesus, Tommy- Carol- ' Steve writhed, his spine curling. Everything felt dizzy and wonderful, and he needed to move, more than anything.

'I said hold *still*,' Tommy said, a firm hand on the small of Steve's back. 'I haven't done this before, I'm trying- '

Although he wanted to give a wry remark about Tommy having never had sex before, Steve found himself at a loss for words when he felt a distinctly blunt pressure against his hole. Wide-eyed, Steve lifted his head, only to find Carol's hand threading through his hair. She brought him back down for a kiss, swallowing the moan, the

faint grunt of indignation as he was opened up, wider than her small fingers had done. Tommy's hand on his hip and back held steady as he was breached, and Steve thought it wouldn't end, couldn't end, until blissfully, Tommy rolled his hips and he felt a hot drag as he pulled back.

Steve couldn't see Tommy's face, but he could feel the way his fingertips pressed into his back. Carol's were holding him, too, keeping him down as Tommy slid into him, an inch at a time. It burned, but Steve was frozen, mouth agape, as something sweet filled him. It couldn't hurt that much. Not when Carol kissed him, not when Tommy was pushing him in turn further into Carol, not when their hands stroked his back and he could hear them, their sighs and their moans and Carol cooing both their names and Tommy's breath was at the nape of his neck. Steve shivered and grunted, holding his breath until he felt the coarse thatch of hair against his ass.

He couldn't move. He was trapped between them, Carol beneath him and Tommy on top. Not that Steve minded all that much; he'd always been caught between them. As kids at school, sitting in detention, to group dates at the diner where they filled one side of the booth. And now, each thrust of Tommy's driving him into Carol, as he wedged his hand between them and felt around for her clit, until she shuddered and tossed her head back. He'd never felt like a third wheel because he'd always been part of a tricycle. He was a spoke in their trio, binding them together, until they moved as one. Steve loved them, and they loved him, even as life had tried to tear them apart. They were a unit. They always had been.

With a puff of air against Carol's throat, Steve let out the breath he was holding and keened back against Tommy. He felt stretched, full, and every slow press forward put pressure on that one spot he couldn't name that had sent his nerves into a dizzying, dancing spree before. Shuddering, it occurred to him dimly that Tommy was inside him, just as he was inside Carol, and he could feel both of them in a way he never had before. It made him moan, deep and whole-bodied, burrowing his face back into the crook of Carol's shoulder as Tommy lapped at the back of his neck.

Steve swore. Gritting his teeth, he kept his head down, and allowed himself to get rocked between them. This felt several shades of

wrong, but Steve couldn't bring himself to think about it just then. He'd always been so utterly stuck between the two of them. It was as though their entire friendship had been building up to culminate at this moment. His whole existence had been teetering towards this, the three of them clinging desperately to one another. His mouth on Carol's jaw, as she kissed Tommy's temple, who kissed the back of Steve's neck. They were together, just as they should have always been.

It was difficult to say who came first. Steve recognised both of their warning signs by now, as they did with him. Carol's right leg always twitched, her toes curling as she neared her climax. Tommy's face became a picture of concentration, his teeth gritting as he wrapped his arm around whoever he was with. Both seemed to occur right then, and Steve could only hold on for the ride. A heel to his ribcage, an arm tight around his midsection, as he pawed at the pillow and came with a shout.

At some point Tommy rolled off him. Steve felt the arm around his middle tug him off Carol, and he collapsed on his side, leaning slightly against Tommy. Sweat covered his skin, and he couldn't bring himself to think about what else had caused a mess. Pressing his head to Carol's chest, mouth against a cool, twitching breast, he let out a heaving gasp of air. There was a shiver of pain, and he hated the idea of needing to get up. It all felt distant, though, a problem for his future self. Not right then, not now. All he had to do just then was breathe and feel the hands on him, the lips that kissed him, the breath that puffed over his skin as they whispered his name.

It was that which lulled him into a sense of a peace. School was behind them, summer was ahead, and beyond that they were leaving Indiana. It seemed like forever, an eternity. Just them and the endless possibilities that lay ahead for them.

*

The Harringtons moved to Hawkins shortly after Steve started first grade. Although he'd started school in Chicago, and so wasn't all that far behind in the grand scheme of things, he did join Hawkins Elementary a full six weeks after school began. At the time, Steve hadn't understood the scope of what was occurring, only that the

drive seemed to last forever. It was several weeks before he realised he hadn't seen his half-siblings for almost a month. They were far older than him, his half-sister nine years his senior and his half-brother twelve, both being the result of his father's first failed marriage.

Steve didn't settle in well his first semester at Hawkins. His mother's parents were strangers, horses smelt weird, and he was a big fish in a small pond. Even at six, the noose of a small town tightened around his neck. He missed the skyscrapers, he missed the bright lights. Deer frightened him, the quarry was a gaping maw in the ground, and the slang was all wrong (the crayons were called twisters, not zoomies, no matter what the kids at school said).

The isolation continued on through the second semester, though it began to loosen a little, as the weather warmed. He came back after Christmas break with a slew of stories about Chicago. His teacher made him stand at the front of the class and show pictures of him and his family at different sights, all familiar to him, but unusual and strange to the kids from a small town. There was a small, pale, red-headed girl that sat opposite him, and she never spoke, not until he brought up his grandparent's ranch just outside of town.

'But your grandparents live in Chicago.'

'Yeah, but they're my dad's folks.'

'But they own a farm down here.'

'It's not a farm, it's a ranch,' Steve shot back, though he didn't know the difference himself. 'And they're my mom's parents.'

'And your brother and sister live back in Chicago?'

Steve nodded, not wanting to get into the whole thing. The girl, who he knew as Carol but rarely spoke to him except to ask to borrow his 'zoomies', furrowed her brow and pouted her lips in the same way she always did. And then she shrugged and huffed and stole the purple crayon from his desk and went back to scribbling.

'I only have a Meemaw and a Pop. My mom is living in the city at the

moment, goin' to college, so you must be real lucky.'

Over the rest of the semester, he began to talk to Carol more. She was mad about horses, and would frequently draw them all over whatever paper she had available. She would ask him about the farm his grandparents have, ignoring all the gentle reminders that it was a ranch, not a farm, until Steve realised she did it just to rile him up.

By the start of April, she had grown enough for his grandparents to allow her to begin taking horse riding lessons. Steve's father had begun to spend the occasional weekend at work, and his mother had begun working for a company that sold houses, so he would spend Saturdays with his grandparents. He didn't like horses all that much, and the hay would make him itch, but he liked playing with Carol. Sure, his parents didn't quite approve, but his grandparents, who he'd begun to know by that stage, thought she was sweet.

Steve didn't understand why people looked down on the Ducketts. His mother made a passing comment on how young Carol's mother was, and his teachers always asked Carol if her mother was home. Nobody ever asked Steve that, even when he began wearing his house keys on a chain around his neck. But Carol would invite him over after school, and her grandparents were as sweet on him as his were on Carol, and that suited him just fine. Family, they taught him, was what you made it. It would take years before Steve finally understood what they meant by that.

*

They moved to a small apartment off-campus, halfway between Findlay University and Owens Community College. The community college had only opened a few years earlier, the building still shiny and new when Steve went for a tour. He was too late to attend the first semester, but that suited him just fine, as he wanted to work and figure out what direction his compass was pointing in. His parents thought he was an idiot, and told him as much as he packed up, asking why he couldn't just stay in Hawkins and work there, why he couldn't go to Heartland. There was nothing special in Ohio, just a whole load more of Hawkins-like nothingness. Steve just smiled and ignored them, right up until he kissed his mother on the cheek, clapped his father on the shoulder and left.

The two bedroom apartment was partly furnished. The rent, split between the three of them, was low. The pipes rattled, the paint was peeling in the kitchen, and the elevator was typically out of order 'on Tuesdays and Wednesdays,' according to the landlord. But it was theirs, in all its cramped glory. The first night, they pushed the furniture up against the wall, revealing marks in the grey carpet and danced to British post-punk. They called out the colour of eyes as they drank cheap, warm beer until there was a thump on the floor below them from someone tapping on the ceiling with a broom.

During the first semester, as he waited for the next enrolments to open up, Steve worked at a local craft store, cutting fabric and recommending yarn to elderly women and young mothers. They found him charming, with his goofy smile, soft hair and good looking charm. The women he worked with (as he was the only person with a Y chromosome who was employed there) found him sweet and always brought in extra slices of cake or an extra serving of the previous night's dinner. With one car between the three of them, Steve was often picked up by Tommy or Carol, and his coworkers were introduced to both of them. Steve gushed about what Carol was studying, and gleefully went on about the radio station Tommy was working at as a junior assistant.

They stayed in Ohio over Christmas and New Years. Carol baked her usual cookies, and included enough for Steve to take with him to the store. Winnie, who Steve often closed with on a Thursday evening, had knitted him a sweater, complete with pompoms that lined the neck. Even Tommy's teasing couldn't get him to take it off. In lieu of a tree, Tommy painted a post-modern Christmas tree on a canvas and they sat it on the dining table, which they never used. They took turns adding decorations, with glitter, crepe paper and pieces of yarn.

He started at Owens in January, in a mathematics concentration. He continued to work at the store on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturday mornings. A pattern began to emerge, as the three of them fell into the new routine of their lives, of school, work, and all that went in between. For the first time, Steve understood what satisfaction meant.

They didn't share a bed every night. The second bedroom, which had become a study as much as a store room, also had a bed. Carol would

sometimes fall into it after a late-night cram session. Tommy worked the graveyard shift on Thursdays and Fridays, and he would sleep there to avoid waking Carol and Steve, who started early on Friday and Saturday mornings respectively. Steve would sometimes use it when he had nightmares of the upside down and of Billy, who he still refused to talk about.

But it was just as common for the three of them to curl up around one another, Steve burrowed between the two of them. The painted Christmas tree hung above their bed, a symbol of their unity. He'd often wake up in a knot of limbs. Carol's hair would be trapped under his head, and Tommy would have his face burrowed into Steve's shoulder, and everything would be right in the world. He would wake slowly, watching the two of them until the alarm would ring and they'd need to go about their day. Days that were now filled with new faces compared to those in Hawkins, friends and coworkers and teachers that didn't care about who they had once been, but only who they were now.

Steve was accepted into Findlay in March. With Carol in class and Tommy at the radio station, he rode his bike to the craft store instead, waving his acceptance letter. He was smothered in a sea of rose talc powder and menthol cigarettes as his cheeks were kissed and his carefully coiffed hair flattened. After explaining what a degree in Applied Emphasis of Actuary Preparation meant (and why he would want to work in risk management, because a boy like Steve had surely never been in a dangerous situation before), he ran off to hunt down Tommy, who would be knocking off work soon. They waited for Carol outside the veterinary school, sharing a pastry and sipping coffee, Steve grinning as Tommy called him a nerd and kept reading his acceptance letter with a level of glee that rivalled Steve's own.

He didn't bother to tell his parents until the following day. His evening was taken up by Tommy and Carol. Each time they whispered how proud they were, he shivered and swallowed the words from their mouths as they kissed him. Steve could never quite will up the same amount of self efficacy as Tommy and Carol did for him, but he drank in everything they said, letting it burn inside of him as he gripped the sheets and watched the glitter on the painting

catch the light and become awash in red and gold and blue.

*

Tommy began to host a radio show between 10:00pm and 1:00am on Wednesday and Friday nights, dedicated to something he called grunge. He played bands with names like Sonic Youth and the Pixies, which Steve liked the sound of and would sometimes listen in. Hearing Tommy on the radio made him grin and laugh, and he liked to call and hear Tommy get flustered as he tried to juggle between the soundboard and the phone. Winnie, who was nearing sixty-five, didn't quite understand that 'loud, busy music', but she'd always have Tommy sign something whenever he came in, just to see him smile.

Carol began to attend a women's group at college. She attended meetings and lectures about feminist ideology, and would return after to gush to Tommy and Steve. The burn of being known as a slut around high school, despite only ever being with Tommy (and, privately, Steve), still ached. Hearing the accusations that had been thrown at other girls, simply for hitting puberty early or kissing boys at parties or simply having a private moment gossiped about began to soothe her. Steve wasn't sure if she had revealed to anyone about the relationship the three of them shared, and it didn't quite help when some of the women would go, 'oh, so *you're* Steve,' when he'd meet them.

With one car between the three of them, they would frequently take turns picking one another up. Tommy worked unusual shifts, and Carol would be physically exhausted at the end of the day, after wrangling horses. Steve worked close enough to Findlay that he would walk over and Tommy would pick them up at the end of the day. Steve liked to wander Findlay campus, wondering how it would feel to finally study there instead of playing visitor. He'd found a bench under an oak tree outside the student offices where Carol volunteered and would open up his books to work on his homework.

The windows off the offices would be emblazoned with different posters and flags, and Steve would eye them, specifically one in particular. The women's office, where Carol spent much of her time. The African-American student's office. The Hispanic office. The LGBT office. Steve would sit there, chewing on the end of his pencil,

and then busy himself with his homework, telling himself he wasn't even technically a student here yet, and he could deal with it later.

*

Finals at Findlay started in the last week of April. The campus was unusually quiet that Friday, as Steve made his way to the usual bench. Carol's first exam finished just before 4:00pm, and Tommy had promised to take the three of them out to a steak dinner, despite Carol's protests that she needed to study. He spotted a familiar face inside the women's room, and he waved before taking out his Walkman and popping on the headphones. With his head burrowed in his Calculus II homework, he was quickly lost in a sea of numbers that filled him with peace.

He didn't hear his name being called. He didn't hear the tap of feet or the laugh, not until there was a hand on his shoulder and Steve jolted up. Peering down at him was a familiar long, straight nose, a collection of freckles on one cheek and a pair of pale eyes that had always felt like his namesake. As the British band he was listening to continued to sing about Enola Gay around his neck, Steve found himself pushing to his feet. His cheeks grew hot and he coughed, hiding the growing blush as he pulled the headphones away from his neck and pressed the stop button on his Walkman.

'Sammy?'

'Goddamn, man, I knew it was you. Holy shit!'

Steve froze. The long buried crush, laying dormant for two years, suddenly spilled forth within him. He was all too aware of the remnants of the chewed pencil on his tongue, the Italian sub he'd had for lunch on his breath. His t-shirt hadn't been washed for three days as he'd kept forgetting to throw it in the wash basket. Mostly he became aware of his hair, which he'd grown long and kept swept to one side and tucked behind an ear, no longer fighting the social boundaries of high school.

In front of him stood Sammy Grey. He'd shot up and now stood over Steve, his wild, curly hair adding several inches to his height. The grin he wore made something twist inside Steve, the way it had all

those years ago in the locker room. He carried a backpack over his shoulder, and Steve became momentarily distracted by the way Sammy's fist clutched the strap, his thumb running along the edge of it.

'What- what're you doing here?' he finally asked, stumbling over his words like he was still in junior high.

'I'm going here. In the fall, I mean,' he added with an easy laugh. 'My aunt lives up this way, and my mom wanted to see what the campus was like. My dad got a little excited there was a lacrosse team here, too, so he wanted to see them practice.'

'Wow. That's- you're still playing lacrosse, huh?'

Running his hands through his hair, Steve wondered what the hell he was doing. He hadn't styled his hair the way he once had in months. Tommy liked to run his hands through it and Carol tended to hog the bathroom in the morning. Now he wished he'd used some hairspray that morning. He'd also dropped some of his sub down his front over lunch, too, and there was a stain on his shirt. And Sammy was there, Sammy goddamn Grey, and anything cool or suave had left his head.

'Yeah. I'm gonna be doing physical therapy. D'you go here?'

And Steve nodded at that, because that was finally something he could talk about. 'Yeah. I mean- not right now, I'm at Owens. But I'm starting next year. I needed to take some time off, figure out what I wanted to do.'

'Man, that is so cool. You were always so cool, Steve.'

And Steve really went pink at that. He laughed, ducked his head and rubbed the back of his neck, because he felt the opposite of cool right then.

'What're you gonna be studying?'

'Uh. Actuarial science,' he said, ready to launch into his prepared speech about what an actuary was. But Sammy's eyes lit up and he let out a whistle.

'No shit? My uncle did that here. High five, man, up top.'

Laughing nervously, because that was all Steve was rendered capable of, he lifted his hand and let Sammy slap their hands together. When their hands dropped, Steve pressed the toe of his shoe into the concrete, clearing his throat because he suddenly had no idea what to say. Just over Sammy's shoulder, he saw the door to one of the buildings open and a trickle of students begin to emerge. It was nearing four, and Carol would likely be out soon. Sammy's parents were likely around somewhere, too, wondering where their son had gone.

'So, you're moving on campus?' Steve asked, trying to find a safe topic.

'Maybe. My aunt's offered me a room, though, and I think my folks'll want me to take her up on that. Save some money, make sure I'm safe. You know how it is.'

'I live with Tommy and Carol. D'you remember Tommy? He was a defender on the team. Yeah, we live in an apartment, a couple miles away.'

Sammy was looking over his shoulder. His heart skipping a beat, Steve wondered if he'd misspoke, if he'd misread the situation. He went to look himself, when he saw Tommy and Carol making their way up the path, their heads bowed, no doubt discussing the exam. Licking his lips, he turned back, just as Sammy spoke.

'So... d'you... go here?'

Pausing, brow furrowing, Steve cocked his head, confused. He didn't understand, particularly with what they'd been talking about. But Sammy was still eyeballing something over his shoulder, and Steve turned to follow his gaze. The bright, rainbow flag that emblazoned one of the windows of the student office caught his eye. Breathing catching in his throat, he dug his nails into his palms and stood there for a long moment. When he turned back, he found Sammy staring at his chest, likely at the stain left from a pepperoncini.

'Um. Sort of. Yeah. I mean, I'm not a student here, not yet, but...'

Steve stopped, a phrase coming back to him from a film he saw a long time ago and that he hadn't thought about in years. 'I'm... *curious*. So yeah. Yeah, I guess I do.'

'Cool. That's... you were always cool, Steve.'

Time seemed to stop. Over Sammy's shoulder, Steve saw Tommy and Carol. They'd stopped a few feet away, Tommy's arm tossed over Carol's shoulder. They were eyeballing the back of Sammy's head, no doubt trying to gauge the situation. Mouth falling open, Steve let his eyes dart back to Sammy. For the first time, he took in his nervous smile, the flush that lingered on his dark cheeks. Drawing in a breath, Steve swallowed hard and let the words tumble from his mouth.

'D'you want me to show you around? I have work tomorrow morning, but I could pick you up after lunch and I can show you around town. Around two. If you're up for it. If you're free.'

The words came out as a stream, and Steve wasn't even entirely aware of what he was saying. His voice rose just a hair, and he tried to ignore the way that Carol's lips twisted into a wry grin and Tommy shoved a hand to his mouth to stop himself from laughing. But he heard Sammy draw in a breath and then he nodded, causing Steve to feel his heart hammer in his chest.

'Yeah. That'd be... I'd like that. D'you want me to write- '

Snatching up his notepad, Steve made a mad scramble to find a pencil he hadn't already chewed to bits. Thrusting both at Sammy, he tried to remain calm as he watched him scribble down an address and phone number before passing them back. Holding both to his chest, Steve resisted the urge to nervously laugh. Nodding, because he'd been reduced to two actions, he ran his tongue over his teeth and finally met Sammy's eye.

'I'll see you tomorrow, then,' he said, trying to keep his voice even.

'Okay. Cool. Cool. You were always cool, Steve,' Sammy replied, sounding just as breathless. 'Two, then.'

'Yup.'

'I should... my parents are probably wondering where I've gone. I'll-two.'

'Two.'

There was an awkward moment, when Sammy raised his hand. Steve eyeballed it, uncertain, before realising he was waiting for a high-five. Leaving it a beat too late, he swung at empty air, causing Sammy to laugh. With a chuckle, he clapped Steve on the shoulder instead, repeated '*two*', and headed off, knocking his hand on the bench as he did. Steve watched him go, shivering in delight as Tommy and Carol raced up. He was pulled into a one-armed hug against Carol, eyes locked on the back of Sammy's head until he turned a corner.

'Was that Sammy Grey?' Tommy asked, grabbing the notebook that Sammy had written his address in.

'Uh-huh.'

'As in, midfielder at Hawkins Sammy Grey?'

'Uh-huh.'

'As in, left you pining for a month Sammy Grey?'

'It wasn't a month,' Steve argued, even as Carol coughed 'liar,' in his ear.

'As in, sexual awakening Sammy Grey?'

'Oh my God, shut up,' Steve finally drawled, snatching the notebook away. 'I'm showing him around Findlay tomorrow, that's all.'

'You're blushing!' Carol hissed. 'It's a date.'

'It's not a date!'

'Our little Stevie is going on date!' Carol gushed, tossing her arms around his shoulders and kissing his cheek.

Tommy gave a delighted holler, whistling loudly. A few students

peered over as they walked past, and Steve could only duck his head and grin, even as he protested that it totally wasn't a date. Rolling his eyes, he began to shove everything into his bag, trying his darnedest to hide his grin.

'Hey, if he agreed to go on a date with you when you've got something between your teeth, it's meant to be,' Tommy teased.

At Steve's horrified face, Carol shook her head and pinched his cheeks. 'You don't. But the stain on your shirt is incredibly unfortunate.'

Tommy grabbed Steve's bag, zipped it up, and slung it over his shoulder. Looping their arms together, he guided him towards the parking lot. As usual, Steve found himself sandwiched between the two of them, giddy and dizzy. They bounced off one another, Carol holding onto Steve's shirt as she swung around, lightly teasing him over his old crush. He eventually got her off the subject long enough to ask about the exam, and both he and Tommy rolled their eyes when she lamented over her worries. Tommy mentioned a band he'd been listening to called Soundgarden, and Steve asked why he couldn't just play more Madonna.

And Tommy asked if they wanted to see a film later that weekend.

And Carol snapped her gum and admitted she wanted a break from studying.

And Steve just grinned as he was knocked between them, his arms tightening around the pair as he let the pair pull him in tight. Whatever laid in the future, he had them. Tommy-and-Steve-and-Carol. He liked the sound of that.